PROGRESS
VS.
APOCALYPSE
THE STORIES WE
TELL OURSELVES

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“Progress vs. Apocalypse” by John Michael Greer was adapted from The Long Descent: A User’s Guide to the End of the Industrial Age; © 2008 by John Michael Greer, used by permission of the author and New Society Publishers.
Discussions about peak oil and the predicament of industrial society constantly revolve around two completely different, and in fact opposite, sets of assumptions and beliefs about the future. Most people insist that no matter what problems crop up before us, modern science, technology, and raw human ingenuity will inevitably win out and make the world of the future better than the world of today. A sizeable minority of people, however, insist that no matter what we do, some overwhelming catastrophe will soon bring civilization suddenly crashing down into mass death and a Road Warrior future.

These competing narratives reflect the hidden presence of myth. Many people nowadays think only primitive people believe in myths, but myths dominate the thinking of every society, including our own. Myths are the stories we tell ourselves to make sense of our world. Human beings think with stories as inevitably as they see with eyes and walk with feet, and the most important of those stories—the ones that define the nature of the world for those who tell them—are myths.

According to the myth of progress, all of human history is a grand tale of human improvement. From the primitive ignorance and savagery of our cave-dwelling ancestors, people climbed step by step up the ladder of progress, following in the wake of the evolutionary drive that raised us up from primeval slime and brought us to the threshold of human intelligence. Ever since our ancestors first became fully human, knowledge gathered over the generations made it possible for each culture to go further, become wiser, and accomplish more than the ones that came before it. With the coming of the scientific revolution three hundred years ago, the slow triumph of reason over nature shifted into overdrive and has been accelerating ever since. Eventually, once the last vestiges of primitive superstition and ignorance are cast aside, our species will leap upward from the surface of its home planet and embrace its destiny among the stars.

Conversely, the myth of apocalypse suggests that human history is a tragic blind alley. People once lived in harmony with their world, each other, and themselves, but that golden age ended with a disastrous wrong turning and things have gone downhill ever since. The rise of vast, unnatural cities governed by bloated governmental bureaucracies, inhabited by people who have abandoned spiritual values for a wholly material existence, marks the point of no return. Sometime soon the whole rickety structure will come crashing down, overwhelmed by sudden catastrophe, and billions of people will die as civilization comes apart and rampaging hordes scour the landscape. Only those who abandon a corrupt and doomed society and return to the old, true ways of living will survive to build a better world.

Both these myths have deep roots in the collective imagination of the modern world, and few people seem to be able to think about the future without following one story or the other. Both are inappropriate for the futures we are actually likely to encounter.
imagination of the modern world, and very few people seem to be able to think about the future at all without following one story or the other. It would be hard to find any two narratives less appropriate, though, for the futures we are actually likely to encounter. Both of them rely on assumptions about the world that won’t stand up to critical examination.

The faith in progress, for example, rests on the unstated assumption that limits don’t apply to us, since the forward momentum of human progress automatically trumps everything else. If we want limitless supplies of energy badly enough, the logic seems to be, the world will give it to us. Of course the world did give it to us—in the form of unimaginably huge deposits of fossil fuels stored up over hundreds of millions of years through photosynthesis—and we wasted it in a few centuries of fantastic extravagance. The lifestyles we believe are normal are entirely the product of that extravagance. The past is not so much a linear story of progress as the folklore of the industrial age would have it. The lives of peasants, priests, soldiers, and aristocrats in Sumer in 3000 BCE differed only in relatively minor details from those of their equivalents in Chou dynasty China fifteen centuries later, Roman North Africa fifteen centuries after that, or medieval Spain another fifteen centuries closer to us. The ebb and flow of technologies before the modern period had little impact on daily life, because without cheap abundant energy to power them, it was more efficient and economical to rely on human labor with hand tools.

This stable pattern changed only when the first steam engines allowed people to begin tapping the fantastic amounts of energy hidden away within the Earth. That and nothing else brought the industrial world into being. For thousands of years before that time, everything else necessary for an industrial society had been part of the cultural heritage of most civilizations. Renewable energy sources? Wind power, waterpower, biomass, and muscle power were all used extensively in the pre-industrial past without launching an industrial society. Scientific knowledge? The laws of mechanics were worked out in ancient times, and a Greek scientist even invented the steam turbine two centuries before the birth of Christ; without fossil fuels it was a useless curiosity. Human resourcefulness and ingenuity? It’s as arrogant as it is silly to insist that people in past ages weren’t as resourceful and ingenious as we are.

Fossil fuel energy, and only fossil fuel energy, made it possible to break with the old agrarian pattern and construct the industrial world. Unless some new energy source as abundant as fossil fuels comes online before today’s extravagant lifestyles finish burning through the resources that made the industrial age possible, we will find ourselves back in the same world our ancestors knew, with the additional burdens of a huge surplus population and an impoverished planetary biosphere to contend with. Combine these constraints with the plain hard reality that the fossil fuels that made industrialism possible won’t be there anymore, and the myth of perpetual progress becomes a mirage.

Believers in apocalypse, for their part, insist that the end of industrial civilization will be sudden, catastrophic, and total. That claim is just as hard to square with the realities of our predicament as the argument for perpetual progress. Every previous civilization that has fallen has taken centuries to collapse, and there’s no reason to think the present case will be any different. The resource base of industrial society is shrinking but it’s far from exhausted, the impact of global warming and ecological degradation build slowly over time, and governments and ordinary citizens alike have every reason to hold things together as long as possible.

The history of the last century—think of the Great Depression, the Second World War, and the brutal excesses of Communism and Nazism—shows that industrial societies can endure tremendous disruption without dissolving into a Hobbesian war of all against all, and people in hard times are far more likely to follow orders and hope for the best than to turn into the rampaging, mindless mobs that play so large a role in survivalist fantasies these days.

The Hollywood notion of an overnight collapse makes for great screenplays but has nothing to do with the
realities of how civilizations fall. In the aftermath of Hubbert’s peak, fossil fuel production will decline gradually, not simply come to a screeching halt, and so the likely course of things is gradual descent rather than free fall, following the same trajectory marked out by so many civilizations in the past. This process is not a steady decline, either; between sudden crises come intervals of relative stability, even moderate improvement; different regions decline at different paces; existing social, economic, and political structures are replaced, not with complete chaos, but with transitional structures that may develop considerable institutional strength themselves.

Does this model apply to the current situation? Almost certainly. As oil and natural gas run short, economies will come unglued and political systems disintegrate under the strain. But there’s still oil to be had—the Hubbert curve is a bell-shaped curve, after all, and assuming the peak came around 2010, the world in 2040 will be producing about as much oil as it was producing in 1980. With other fossil fuels well along their own Hubbert curves, nearly twice as many people to provide for, and a global economy dependent on cheap abundant energy in serious trouble, the gap between production and demand will be a potent driver of poverty, spiralling shortages, rising death rates, plummeting birth rates, and epidemic violence and warfare. Granted, this is not a pretty picture, but it’s not an instant reversion to the Stone Age either.

THE RELIGION OF PROGRESS

The myth of progress, like the belief that everyone creates their own reality, raises expectations that the real world in an age of diminishing resources simply isn’t able to meet. As the gap between expectation and experience grows, so, too, does the potential for paranoia and hatred. Those who cling to faith in progress are all too likely to go looking for scapegoats when the future fails to deliver the better world they expect.

The sheer emotional power of the myth of progress makes this a difficult trap to avoid. The claim that progress is inevitable and good has become so deeply woven into our collective thinking that many people simply can’t get their minds around the implications of fossil fuel depletion, or for that matter any of the other factors driving the contemporary crisis of industrial civilization. All these factors promise a future in which energy, raw materials, and their products—including nearly all of our present high technology—will all be subject to ever-tightening limits that will make them less and less available over time. Thus we face a future of regress, not progress.

The problem here is that regress is quite literally an unthinkable concept these days. Suggest to most people that progress will soon shift into reverse, and that their great-great-grandchildren will make do with technologies not that different from the ones their great-great-grandparents used as the industrial age gives way to the agrarian societies of a deindustrial future, and you might as well be trying to tell a medieval peasant that heaven with all its saints and angels isn’t there anymore. In words made famous a few years ago by Christopher Lasch, progress is our “true and only heaven”; it’s where most modern people put their dreams of a better world, and to be deprived of it cuts to the core of many people’s view of reality.

Even those who reject the myth of progress in favor of the myth of apocalypse draw most of their ideas from the faith they think they’ve abandoned. Like Satanists who accept all the presuppositions of Christian theology but root for the other side, most of today’s believers in apocalypse swallow whole the mythic claim that progress is as inevitable as a steamroller; it’s simply that they believe the steamroller is about to roll its way off a cliff. The suggestion that the steamroller is in the process of shifting into reverse, and will presently start rolling patiently back the way it came, is just as foreign to them as it is to believers in progress.

It’s not going too far, I think, to call belief in progress the established religion of the modern industrial world. In the same way that Christians have traditionally looked to heaven and Buddhists to nirvana, most people look to progress for their hope of salvation and their explanation for why the world is the way it is. To
believers in the religion of progress, all other human societies are steps on a ladder that lead to modern industrial civilization. Progress means our kind of progress, since our civilization has by definition progressed further than anyone else’s, and the road to the future thus inevitably leads through us to something like our society, but even more so. All of these claims are taken for granted as self-evident truths by most people in today’s industrial societies. Not one of them has a basis in logic or evidence; like the doctrine of the Trinity or the Four Noble Truths, they are statements of faith.

The religion of progress has a central role in driving the predicament of industrial civilization, because the dead end of dependence on rapidly depleting fossil fuels can’t be escaped by going further ahead on the path we’ve been following for the last three centuries or so. Almost without exception, the technological progress of the industrial age will have to shift into reverse as its foundation—cheap abundant energy—goes away, and most of the social and cultural phenomena that grew out of fossil fuel–powered technology will go away as well. The peak and decline of the world’s oil reserves is the first step in this process, and the slower exhaustion of coal and other nonrenewable fuels will complete it, setting the industrial world on a trajectory that will most likely lead to something like the technology and society it had before the industrial revolution began in the first place.

When the parade of wonders grinds to a halt, the impact on deindustrializing cultures may be immense. If progress is indeed the unrecognized religion of the industrial world, the failure of its priests to produce miracles on cue could plunge many people into a crisis of faith with no easy way out. The recent vogue for conspiracy theories and apocalyptic visions of the future strike me as two clear signs that people are beginning to turn their back on the religion of progress and seek their salvation from other gods. Neither pursuing scapegoats nor waiting for redemption through catastrophe are particularly productive as ways of dealing with the transition to the deindustrial age, but both of them offer a great deal of emotional consolation, and it’s likely to take more than the usual amount of clearheadedness to avoid them in the difficult times we are likely to encounter in the near future.

Peoples of the past, stripped of their traditional faith in one way or another, have responded in many ways. Some have launched revitalization movements to renew the old faith or to revive some older vision of destiny, some have embraced newly minted belief systems or traditions imported from distant lands, and some have simply huddled down into themselves and died. We have begun to see examples of each of these reactions in the modern industrial world. Which of them turns out to be most common may have drastic effects on the way the twilight of the industrial age works out, because the stories we tell ourselves will have an immense impact on the world we create at the end of the industrial age.
We have reached a point of crisis with regard to energy...
The essential problem is not just that we are tapping the wrong energy sources (though we are), or that we are wasteful and inefficient (though we are), but that we are overpowered, and we are overpowering nature.
— from the Introduction, by Richard Heinberg

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