

What Oil Can Do to Tiny States – and Big Ones, Too!

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This past week, *The Economist* (January 25, 2003) published an article entitled, “São Tomé and its neighbours: What oil can do to tiny states.” The article presented an interesting description of what happens to small states that strike oil. Invariably, the oil is used to buy a rich and lazy lifestyle for the ruling elite, and destroys the traditional ways of making a living for the general population. The article describes the cases of the African states of Gabon and Equatorial Guinea, which discovered large oil reserves a few years ago. “Equatorial Guinea now pumps more oil per person than Saudi Arabia.” As a result of this bonanza, farmers deserted their farms for the cities, and the country’s agricultural sector has collapsed. In Gabon, the population “turned up their noses at menial jobs like taxi driving or shopkeeping, which they leave to immigrants from poorer places such as Togo and Mali. Agriculture in Gabon, as in Equatorial Guinea, is all but dead.”

Gabon’s oil reserves are now running out, and the population will have to return to cocoa growing and snail farming. The article speculates that the same fate awaits Equatorial Guinea and São Tomé, when their oil reserves are exhausted.

What *The Economist* article fails to point out is that what happens to small states when their national oil reserves run out is much the same as will happen to big states when global oil reserves run out. By the year 2050, global oil reserves will be exhausted, and industrial civilization will collapse worldwide. But there is a very significant – and very tragic – difference between the situation when small states run out of oil and when the world runs out of oil. When small states run out of oil, the population will simply return to what they did before, or they will migrate, or they will beg for food from the rest of the world. Life goes on, for them and the rest of the planet, pretty much as before. When the world runs out of oil, however, global human population will collapse and, unless a significant intervention occurs, the biosphere will have been destroyed by the petroleum age.

As the energy inputs of oil (mechanization, irrigation, insecticides and other modern high-energy inputs) cease to flow, there will be a massive drop in global food production. World human population will drop from over six billion people to a few hundred million, since that is all that the current-solar-energy budget of the planet will support in the long term. The death of more than six billion people is not the real tragedy, however, since everyone must someday die. The great tragedy is that oil-fed global industrialization is destroying the biosphere – causing the extinction of an estimated 30,000 species a year. If industrial civilization continues until global oil supplies run out, what will remain will be a ruined planet, with far less biological diversity than before oil. Because of global warming, the petroleum age may even cause a greenhouse death of the planet, with the extinction of mankind along with all other large plant and animal species.

Mankind is now in the process of causing the extinction of all kinds of large animals – tigers, rhinoceros, beluga sturgeon, pandas, apes, orangutans, lemurs, chimpanzees – just to name a few. When the petroleum age is over, many of these species will be gone – forever. When the world returns to a current-solar-energy-supported lifestyle, if

mankind survives at all it will inhabit a desolate place, devoid of the wonderful variety of other large animals. Because of oil and global industrialization, African and Asian populations have exploded, and the current generation of Africans and Asians is now killing all of the other primates, to eat as “bush meat,” or to use their habitat for firewood or farmland, or to sell as pets to animal collectors or zoos in other parts of the world. When the industrial age is over and Africa and Asia return to a current-solar-energy lifestyle, they will find it a lonely place to be for the next several billion years. And who killed cock robin? It was the petroleum age, it was technology, it was industrialization, it was economic development – it was civilization that killed cock robin. A 100-year drunken binge of incredibly profligate production and consumption – made possible by the one-time windfall of fossil fuel -- will have caused the death of nature as we know it, as it evolved over billions of years.

What is happening to small states as they run through their oil windfalls is happening – “writ large” – to the whole world. But modern man, it seems, cannot see the forest for the trees, for all that is being done about the problem – a life-and-death problem for the biosphere – is just so much “hand wringing.”

What can be done to stop the global disaster now in progress? By modern civilization, with its commitment to and addiction to ever more industrial production (with its concomitant environmental destruction and species extinction), not very much at all. Modern civilization, with its religion of economics, claims that, although it is industrial production that has caused the problem, it is more industrial development can save us. It is like a drunk or heroin addict claiming that just one more drink or fix will solve his problem. Perhaps a better question to ask is: What could *happen* to stop, or at least mitigate, the global disaster underway? And the answer to that question is: The age of global industrialization must end, and the sooner that it ends, the more of the biosphere’s diversity will survive. This bears repeating. The mass species extinction and global warming that is taking place is being caused by global industrialization, and it will not end until the era of global industrialization is over. And the sooner it is over, the more of the biosphere’s diversity will remain.

T S Elliot (“The Hollow Men”) surmised that the world would end in a whimper. That is possible, but the leaders of the human species do not do things that way. Mankind will not sit around collectively and starve to death as the world’s food supplies disappear as global oil reserves exhaust. Nation will attack nation, tribe will attack tribe, clan will attack clan, fighting over the last drop of oil and the food that it makes possible. Unless plague strikes first – and the possibility of that increases daily with each new day of gross intermingling and each new strain of genetically modified life – global famine will lead to global war, not to global resignation.

Can anything be done to bring an early end to the mass industrialization that is choking the planet to death? Or is a solution totally beyond man’s capacity? Economics has a stranglehold on the planet. As the situation grows more and more dire, all world leaders call for more industrial production, not less. Instead of using the last of the fossil fuels to prepare for a better world tomorrow, all world leaders are champing at the bit to consume every bit of it as fast as possible, in a feeding frenzy of consumption and hedonic pleasure – more factories, more cars, more roads, more subways, more houses, more computers, more telephones, more communications, more bandwidth, more hospitals, more drugs, more physicians, more schools, more buildings, more clothes, more food, more money, better homes, better medical care, more televisions,

more CDs, more churches, more temples, more mosques, more exotic vacations, more airplanes, more cruise ships, more ski lodges, more movies, more spare time, more and better sports stadia – more of every material good, service, and pleasure. More for our generation even though it means a ruined world for all generations to come. And more is never enough. And the cost to the other species of the planet and to future generations of mankind does not matter. The gap between rich and poor grows wider and wider, and ever-growing numbers endure lives of hellish misery as Moloch consumes the Earth. The religion of economics calls for more efficiency and promises an ever-higher standard of living for human beings, even as millions more are born into direst poverty, the animal world is disappearing, and our world crumbles. The leaders offer more of everything, and say that more industrial production will provide it. But more industrial production means more and more people living in dire poverty, and more and more destruction of the environment, and more and more extinction of species. No leader has the courage or the will or the desire to accept and to admit and to declare that it is industrial production that is the problem, not the solution. The lie that continued industrial production and continued peace will reduce poverty and improve mankind's standard of living is very deceptive. The Siren's call to a better life is irresistible. The people are helpless to say "No! We do not believe you any more, and we have suffered enough!" What is to be done? You might start by praying for an early end to the petroleum age.