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Essays

2004–2007

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game that gives as much time and thought to falls as it gives to rises, with algorithms for resource exhaustion and infrastructure decay and the corruptive influence of power and the loss of morale in non-autonomous workers and the loss of adaptability as systems age. A really good game could simulate an ever-shifting landscape of technologies and artifacts and social forms growing and decaying without end. Maybe we're already in one[47].

High Tech

If the present system keeps going another hundred years, computers could run on light instead of electricity. We'll have new materials with miraculous properties. Biotech will enable us to design and grow fantastic (and dangerous) creatures from scratch. Any of these trends could threaten catastrophe — and the discovery of limitless energy would guarantee it.

But within ten years, industrial society will be deep in the Age of Decrease, and most high tech, especially the computer industry, depends on hundreds of subsystems that could break down. Technologies are lost all the time — NASA can no longer put people on the moon, because it requires a body of human expertise that has been lost as technicians retired or died. The full might of industrial civilization cannot duplicate the cathedrals of medieval Europe, because they were built with stone masonry skills developed over generations. If the skills embodied in the computer industry were put aside, even for a few years, could we duplicate a microprocessor?

I don't think we'll have any technology in 2100 that can't be done in 2050 in a garage — or in a network of garages and scrap collections. If there's anything we want to save, we need to begin adapting it now so it can be done on that level, bottom to top. Garage industry doesn't have to profit or die. It doesn't require wage laborers who will quit when money no longer buys food. Technology will be carried through industrial collapse by dedicated amateurs, and then, whether the next world is stable or unstable, they will plant the seeds of a new tech system. . . which is very likely to make another epic mistake.

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[47] http://www.simulation-argument.com/

in economic depression, Wörgl[44] Austria issued local currency that depreciated at 1% per month. The town became prosperous, the system spread to neighboring towns, and the central bank got jealous and killed it. The weakness of demurrage currency is that it goes against the flow of the age of Empire and increase. In a hypothetical age of decentralized stability, it should be a perfect fit.

Games

When I was a kid, we played a board game called Life, where you drive your pink and blue drone family around in a plastic car, and if you don't get doctor or lawyer on your first spin you have no chance of winning. And of course there was Monopoly, where you learn to sympathize with predatory rents and the inevitable accumulation of all property in the hands of a single player, and Risk, in which the armies get bigger and bigger until one player naturally conquers the whole world. Now we have computer strategy games that give us a little rush of addictive pleasure for every increase in territory or production or the strength of units, and fantasy adventure games that hook us with "level grinding" and accumulating money and items.

We're so deep in the myth of increase and triumph that it's hard for us to imagine any other kind of game, but there have been a few. I got this idea from the book *Finite and Infinite Games*: In a game allied to a stable culture, the goal is not to win but to *keep playing*. Surfing works like this, and bull riding, and the old arcade game Asteroids, but the best example is hacky sack, which is low-tech, cooperative, and all about intercepting high-velocity erratic motions and turning them into gentle motions back toward the center.

Single-player computer games never show descent — they just stop at the very peak and say, "You win!" But some online multiplayer games have experimented with reset mechanisms, like the cyclical armageddon in The Reincarnation[45], or the plague in Warcraft[46]. I look forward to a strategy

44 http://alt-money.tribe.net/thread/70e5eb29-853d-44ca-9faa-b789d1757037
45 http://www.the-reincarnation.com/
46 http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/4272418.stm

How to Survive the Crash and Save the Earth[1]

1. Abandon the world.

The world is the enemy of the Earth. The "world as we know it" is a deadly parasite on the biosphere. Both cannot survive, nor can the world survive without the Earth. Do the logic: the world is doomed. If you stay on the parasite, you die with it. If you move to the Earth, and it survives in something like its recent form, you can survive with it.

Our little world is doomed because it's built on a foundation of taking from the wider world without giving back. For thousands of years we've been going into debt and calling it "progress," exterminating and calling it "development," stealing and calling it "wealth," shrinking into a world of our own design and calling it "evolution." We're just about done. We're not just running out of cheap oil — which is used to make and move almost every product, and which gives the average American the energy equivalent of 200 slaves[2]. We're also running out of topsoil, without which we need oil-derived fertilizers to grow food; and forests[3], which stabilize climate and create rain by transpiring water to refill the clouds; and ground water, such as the Ogallala aquifer under the Great Plains, which could go dry any time now. We're running out of room to dump stuff in the oceans without killing them, and to dump stuff in the atmosphere without wrecking the climate, and to manufacture carcinogens without all of us getting cancer. We're coming to the end of global food stockpiles[4], and antibiotics that still work, and our own physical health, and our own mental health, and our grip on reality, and our will to keep the whole game going. Why do you think so many Americans are looking forward to "armageddon" or the "rapture"? We hate this shitty world and we want to blow it up.

In the next five or ten years, the US military will be humiliated, the dollar will collapse, the housing bubble will burst, tens of millions of Americans

1 Originally published December 19, 2004 on http://ranprieur.com/essays/saveearth.html
2 http://dieoff.org/page137.htm#5
3 http://www.rainbowbody.net/Finalempire/FEchap4.htm
4 http://www.truthout.org/docs_04/083104G.shtml

will be destitute, food, fuel, and manufactured items will get really expensive, and most of us will begin withdrawal from the industrial lifestyle. SUV's will change their function from transportation to shelter. We will not be able to imagine how we ever thought calories were bad. Smart people will stop exterminating the dandelions in their yard and start eating them. Ornamental gardens will go the way of fruit hats and bloomers. In the cities, pigeon populations will decline.

This is not the "doom" scenario. I'm not saying anything about death camps, super-plagues, asteroid impacts, solar flares, nuclear war, an instant ice age, or a runaway greenhouse effect. This is the mildest realistic scenario, the slow crash: energy prices will rise, the middle class will fall into the lower class, economies will collapse, nations will fight desperate wars over resources, in the worst places people will starve, and climate disasters will get worse. Your area might resemble the botched conquest of Iraq, or the depression in Argentina, or the fall of Rome, or even a crusty Ecotopia. My young anarchist friends are already packing themselves into unheated houses and getting around by bicycle, and they're noticeably happier than my friends with full time jobs. We just have to make the mental adjustment. Those who don't, who cling to the world they grew up in, numbing themselves and waiting for it all to blow over, will have a miserable time, and if people die, they will be the first. Save some of them if you can, but don't let them drag you down. The first thing they teach lifeguards is how to break holds.

2. Abandon hope

I don't mean that we stop trying, or stop believing that a better world is possible, but that we stop believing that some factor is going to save us even if we do the wrong thing. A few examples:

Jesus is coming.

If you believe the Bible, Jesus told us when he was coming back to save us. He said, "This generation shall not pass." That was 2000 years ago.

will find themselves in debt for life after a week in the Holistic Healing Megaplex.

Money

One feature of modern civilization, something we all take for granted, is absolutely incompatible with stability: interest, or the charging of money for the use of money. For complex reasons, interest forces economic growth, and leads economies into runaway increase. Also, interest forces economic inequality, because those with economic power (money) are able to leverage it into greater and greater power. Interest is positive feedback in its purest form.

Ancient civilizations understood this, which is why many of them had religious laws against usury, or a Jubilee[41] tradition, where every few decades, debts were forgiven and property was redistributed. This was a peaceful way to reset a growth-based economy and enable it to start fresh. Debt forgiveness ended with the Roman Empire, which proceeded to rise higher, get uglier, and fall harder than its predecessors.

An even better way to stabilize an economy is through *negative* interest, where the borrower pays back less than the amount of the loan. This has an effect similar to inflation, but without the destabilizing effect of a constantly increasing money supply. The benefit of negative interest can be spread beyond loans to an entire economy through a demurrage currency[42] system, in which money "goes bad" over time. This discourages hoarding, makes it challenging instead of automatic for the rich to get richer, and leads people to keep their money in circulation and spend it on things with enduring value.

Ancient Egypt had a thousand years of prosperity when their money was in the form of grain that incurred storage charges. Many of the great cathedrals of Europe were built under the Brakteaten[43] system, in which governments taxed people by recalling metal coins and shrinking them. In 1932, deep

[41] http://www.yesmagazine.org/article.asp?ID=532
[42] http://www.ascentofhumanity.com/chapter7-2.php
[43] http://www.p2pfoundation.net/Brakteaten_Money

hundred million people watch propaganda and then impose the tyranny of the majority on each other.

A healthy big system needs to be composed, as far as possible, of sub-150 semi-autonomous cells, the same way our bodies are made up of cells. The danger is that some of these cells will fall into a pattern of runaway increase and drag the rest with them. In the body this is called "cancer," and in the culture of Empire it's called "success."

Medicine and Insurance

Americans are beginning to notice that the problem with our medical system is not that some people lack insurance policies, but that the whole thing costs too much for our society to afford. What they haven't noticed is that this happened through the culture of "growth," enabled by the misuse of insurance. Originally insurance was a way to spread the cost of rare accidents through the larger community. But when insurance is applied to common events, it becomes just a sloppy way to redistribute wealth — and if it's managed by corporations that seek profit and increase, then they will encourage increases in the scope and the cost of whatever they're insuring — which they can easily get away with since people are insulated from the real costs, and don't notice until outrageous expenses have become entrenched.

We could fix the problem in months if everybody had to pay medical costs with cash out of pocket, and if patients without cash either got turned away or treated free. But that would collapse 90% of the medical industry (the wasteful 90%), so it's politically impossible. The best we can do is watch the expensive system gradually break down — or pull back to serve only the rich — while we build new cheap systems through the cracks. But the cheap alternatives now growing through the cracks do not know how to set a broken leg or take out an appendix. A lot of people are going to die or go to the Blackwater debt camps before we sort this out. And even if the new system is based on herbs and dietary supplements and reiki, if we don't change the underlying pattern of growth plus insurance, our grandchildren

Stop waiting for that bus and get walking.

The Mayan calendar is ending.

Some people who scoff at Christian prophecies still manage to believe something equally religious and a lot less specific about what's going to happen. At least Jesus preached peace and enlightenment — the Mayans were a warlike people who crashed their civilization by cutting down the forests of the Yucatan and exhausting their farmland. That's what we should be studying, not their calendar and its alleged message that a better world is coming very soon and with little effort on our part. Now the Mayan calendar gurus will say that it does take effort and we have a choice to go either way, but go back to 1988 and read what 2004 was supposed to look like, and it's obvious that we've already failed.

Technology will save us.

If it does, it will be something we don't even recognize as "technology" — permaculture or orgonomy or water vortices or forest gardening[5] or quantum consciousness or the next generation of the tribe. It will not be a new germ killer or resource extractor or power generator or anything to give us what we want while exempting us from being aware and respectful of other life. Anything like that will just dig us deeper in the same hole.

The system can be reformed.

Yes, and it's also not against the laws of physics for us to go back in time and prevent the industrial age from ever happening. Ten, twenty, thirty years ago the ecologists said "we have to turn it around now or it will be too late." They were right. And not only didn't we turn it around, we sped it up: more cars with worse efficiency, more toxins, more CO2, more deforestation, more pavement, more lawns, more materialism, more corporate rule, more weapons, more war and love of war, more secrets,

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[5]   http://www.agroforestry.co.uk/forgndg.html

more lies, more callousness and cynicism and short-sightedness. Now we're in so deep that politicians right of Nixon are called "liberal" and the Green Party platform is both totally inadequate and politically absurd. Our little system is not going to make it.

Also, there's a time lag between smokestacks and acid rain, between radioactivity and cancer, between industrial toxins and birth defects, between atmospheric imbalance and giant storms, between deforestation and drought, between soil depletion and starvation. The disasters we're getting now are from the relatively mild stuff we did years or decades ago, before SUV's and depleted uranium and aspartame and terminator seeds and the latest generation of factory farms[6]. Even if we could turn it around tomorrow, what's coming is much worse.

We're not strong enough to destroy nature.

Oddly, this argument almost always invokes the word "hubris," as in, "You are showing hubris, or excessive pride, in thinking that by lighting this forest on fire to roast a hot dog, I will burn the forest down. Don't you know humans aren't capable of burning down a forest? Shame on you for your pride."

In fact, we've already almost finished killing the Earth. The deserts of central and southwest Asia were once forests — ancient empires cut down the trees and let the topsoil wash off into the Indian Ocean. In North America a squirrel could go tree to tree from the Atlantic to the Mississippi, and spawning salmon were so thick in rivers and streams that you couldn't row a boat through them, and the seashores were rich with seals, fishes, birds, clams, lobsters, whales. Now they're deserts populated only by seagulls eating human garbage, and nitrogen fertilizer runoff has made dead zones in the oceans, and atmospheric carbon dioxide is increasing oceanic acidity[7], which may dissolve the shells of the plankton. If the plankton die, it's all over.

that absorb that sunlight — which we can increase through permaculture. A city considered alone exceeds carrying capacity, but imagine a 50 mile radius circle, importing and exporting no biomass, with a number of humans limited by the requirement that the land maintains or increases fertility over time. There's no reason they have to be evenly spread out. Many of them can be densely concentrated in a permanent settlement at the center, and this settlement has advantages. It allows more cultural complexity, and it can support centers of learning and healing and manufacturing and trading that would be difficult with a dispersed population, and that would benefit both urbanites and the surrounding rural populations. Leopold Kohr had this vision decades ago: a whole world of politically autonomous city-states, each one with an urban center existing symbiotically with surrounding farmland. We can now improve on Kohr's model, by replacing "farming" with permaculture and managed foraging habitats.

But another thing Kohr emphasized was the importance of scale. We don't have ants the size of dogs, or the size of bacteria, because the ant form only works in a narrow range of sizes. Likewise, human social forms are scale-sensitive, and quantitative changes bring qualitative changes. This is why a Communist state doesn't work like a commune, why large businesses turn evil, and why Kohr made his utopian cities politically independent. The bigger we grow a government, or any institution, the more it tends to serve big-institution needs and not human needs (let alone the needs of nonhumans).

With the wrong structure, even small cities are too big. Anthropologists have calculated, and anecdotal evidence has confirmed, that when a group of humans gets bigger than about 150[40], it undergoes a phase change where people can no longer work things out socially, but only with the help of rules and central control. This doesn't mean we can't have big systems. The Iroquois ran a huge region with a system where small groups would gather and talk until they reached consensus, and then each group would send a representative to a higher-level group that reached consensus, and so on. This was the inspiration for our American "democracy" in which a

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6   http://www.themeatrix.com
7   http://www.independent-media.tv/item.cfm?fmedia_id=8411&fcategory_desc=Environment

40   http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dunbar%27s_number

Ivan Illich calculates[39] that Americans in cars devote far more of their time to transportation than third-worlders on foot, if you include the time spent in wage labor to pay car expenses. Once we have cars, we ruin our cities, spreading all the places we go miles away from each other and filling up the space between with pavement and toxic fumes. And then we *need* cars, and wage labor assignments, to live in this society. Cars rob us of our autonomy, sicken and kill us, consume massive amounts of nonrenewable resources, and don't even save us any time.

But these are effects of the particular way we use cars: as our primary means of transportation, and inside cities. I don't see the harm in keeping a few around for trips between cities — but if there are only a few, the cost of road maintenance per vehicle is astronomical.

What about airplanes? The ones we have now are energy-intensive because their function is to carry heavy weights at high speed. But a hot air balloon riding the wind is extremely efficient. It's possible, with innovations in materials engineering and engine technology and hull design, that we can make aircraft that can go against the wind with enough efficiency to be the main means of travel between cities — especially if it's only people going between cities, and not freight.

Cities

Primitivists argue that it's impossible to have a stable city, because a city requires the importation of resources, and therefore inevitably depletes the surrounding land. But every animal "imports" resources by eating and "exports" resources by excreting waste. The problem with modern cities is that the waste does not go back to the soil, but is mixed with industrial toxins and dumped in sewers and landfills. With universal recycling and composting, including humanure composting, people at any density can export as much as they import.

Of course we still have to obey carrying capacity: The amount of life an area can support is limited by the sunlight that falls on it and the plants

Maybe we can't kill absolutely everything, but we are on the path to cutting life on Earth down to nothing bigger than a cockroach, and we will do so, and all of us will die, unless something crashes our system sooner and only kills most of us.

3. Drop Out.[8]

Dropping out of the present dominant system has both a mental and an economic component that go together like your two legs walking. It's a lot of steps! Maybe you notice that you hate your job, and that you have to do it because you need money. So you reduce expenses, reduce your hours, and get more free time, in which you learn more techniques of self-sufficiency and establish a sense of identity not dependent on where you get your money. Then you switch to a low-status low-stress job that gives you even more room to get outside the system mentally. And so on, until you've changed your friends, your values, your whole life.

The point I have to make over and over about this process, and this movement, is that it's not about avoiding guilt, or reducing your ecological footprint, or being righteous. It's not a pissing contest to see who's doing more to save the Earth — although some people will believe that's your motivation, to justify their own inertia. It's not even about reducing your participation in the system, just reducing your submission and dependence: getting free, being yourself, slipping out of a wrestling hold so you can throw an elbow at the Beast.

This world is full of people with the intelligence, knowledge, skills, and energy to make heaven on Earth, but they can't even begin because they would lose their jobs. We're always arguing to change each other's minds, but nobody will change if they think their survival depends on not changing. Every time you hear about a whistleblower or reporter getting fired for honesty and integrity, you can be sure that they already had a support network, or just a sense of their own value, outside of the system they defied.

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[39] http://ranprieur.com/readings/illichcars.html

[8] See my essay *How To Drop Out* (http://ranprieur.com/essays/dropout.html).

Dropping out is about fighting better. Gandalf has to get off Saruman's tower!

4. **You are here to help**.

In the culture of Empire, we are trained to think of ourselves as here to "succeed," to build wealth and status and walls around ourselves, to get what we desire, to win in games where winning is given meaning by others losing. It is a simple and profound shift to think of ourselves instead as here to help — to serve the greatest good that we can perceive in whatever way is right in front of us.

You don't have to sacrifice yourself for others, or put others "above" you. Why is it so hard to see each other as equals? And it's OK to have a good time. In fact, having a good time is what most helping comes down to — the key is that you're focused on the good times of all life everywhere including your "self," instead of getting caught up in egocentric comparison games that aren't even that fun.

Defining yourself as here to help is a prerequisite for doing some of the other things on this list properly. If you're here to win you're not saving anything but your own wretched ass for a few additional years. If you're dropping out to win you're likely to be stepping on other outsiders, instead of throwing a rope to bring more people out alive. And as the system breaks down, people here to win will waste their energy fighting each other for scraps, while people here to help will build self-sufficient communities capable of generating what they need to survive.

In the real world, being here to help is easier and less stressful, because you will frequently be in a situation where you can't win, but you will almost never be in a situation where there's nothing you can do to help. Being here to win only makes sense in an artificial world rigged so you can win all the time. Thousands of years ago only kings were in that position, and they reacted by massacring all enemies and bathing in blood. Now, through a perfect conjunction of Empire and oil energy, we just put the entire American middle class in that position for 50 years. No one should

recycle old plastic. Today's landfills might become so valuable that gangs fight each other over scavenging rights.

Roads and Rails

Possibly the most enduring legacy of the industrial age will be its roadbeds. Even if the road surfaces turn to crumbled asphalt and weeds, they follow relatively easy paths through gaps blasted in slopes and over land-bridged gullies. Even after tens of thousands of years, crossing a mountain range will be easier than it was 200 years ago. So postindustrial societies could surpass preindustrial societies in travel, trade, and broadness of perspective, with a little investment in clearing landslides and replacing bridges.

Railbeds are even better than roads, because they're built with gentler slopes, and get first priority in the best passes. The rails themselves are likely to be taken for scrap, or in remote areas left to rust. Ideally, old railbeds will be converted to trails and roadways with low-maintenance surfaces.

Bicycles and Horses

Nothing in civilization or nature travels as efficiently over land as a human on a bicycle. If there ever is a stable low-energy society with enough complexity to make ball bearings, bicycles or their descendants are likely to be the main means of travel, mountain bikes on rough wilderness routes and road bikes on well-maintained urban roads.

Where horses surpass cyclists is in their ability to get energy directly from grass. Also they're stronger, and easier to "manufacture." So horses could have a big role in grassy regions or in a deeper crash. There are more horses now in the USA than there have ever been, and in a pinch, we'll quickly find out which ones are good for pulling loads or long-distance riding, and the rest can be turned loose to re-adapt to wildness, or eaten.

Cars and Planes

The automobile might be the worst invention of all time, even worse than the leaf blower. It goes way beyond energy: In *Toward a History of Needs*,

chooses that path, they're likely to force us all into another round of human cannonball.

Wood and Grass

Limiting ourselves to solar energy gathered by plants does not force us to live "primitively." Plant matter can be converted to alcohol, which can be burned in engines or converted to electricity. Poplar and switchgrass^[http://biostock.blogspot.com/2007/04/hybrid-poplars-reduce-carbon-emissions.html are much more effective biofuels than corn and soy, and if grown responsibly can generate energy and rebuild topsoil at the same time. Of course, there will always be the temptation to do it irresponsibly and cover more and more of the Earth with poplars and switchgrass. . .

Metal and Plastic

Metalworking is almost certain to survive. From the Lindsay[38] catalog you can get a collection of books that tell you how to build a full metal shop starting with nothing but scrap and charcoal. Even if that knowlege is lost, it will soon be rediscovered if there is still metal around, and there will be. We won't be mining much, because the easy ores are gone and the difficult ores require sophisticated high-energy techniques. Instead, we will be in the Age of Scrap, scavenging and recycling finished metal from garages and factories and landfills. We have bronze artifacts that have survived since the Bronze Age. Maybe they'll call us the Aluminum Age or the Stainless Steel age or the Age of Concrete with Little Holes where the iron rebar has rusted out. Even iron can be reclaimed. Jared Diamond describes in *Collapse* how the Vikings extracted it from bogs — our descendants will surely figure out how to extract it from the soil under car graveyards.

There will also be plenty of scrap plastic, and not much new plastic since it all comes from oil. I expect a minor renaissance of new techniques to

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38   http://www.lindsaybks.com/

be surprised that we're so stupid, selfish, cowardly, and irresponsible. But younger generations are already getting poorer and smarter.

5. **Learn skills**.

Readers sometimes ask for my advice on surviving the crash — should they buy guns, canned food, water purifiers, gold? I always tell them to learn skills. You know the saying: get a fish, eat for a day; learn to fish, eat for a lifetime. (Just don't take it too literally — there might not be any fish left!)

The most obvious useful skills would include improvising shelter from materials at hand, identifying and preparing wild edibles, finding water, making fire, trapping animals, and so on. But I don't think we're going all the way to the stone age. There will also be a need for electrical work, medical diagnosis, surgery, optics, celestial navigation, composting, gardening, tree propagation, food preservation, diplomacy, practical chemistry, metalworking, all kinds of mechanical repair, and all kinds of teaching. As the 15th century had the Renaissance Man, we're going to have the Postapocalypse Man or Woman, someone who can fix a bicycle, tan a hide, set a broken bone, mediate an argument, and teach history.

Even more important are some things that are not normally called skills, but that make skill-learning and everything else easier: luck, intuition, adaptability, attentiveness, curiosity, physical health, mental health, the ability to surf the flow. Maybe the most fundamental is what they call "being yourself" or "waking up." Most human behavior is based neither on logic nor intuition nor emotion, but habit and conformity. We perceive, think, and act as we've always done, and as we see others do. This works well enough in a controlled environment, but in a chaotic environment it doesn't work at all. If you can just get 10% of yourself free of habit and conformity, people will call you "weird." 20% and they'll call you a genius, 30% and they'll call you a saint, 40% and they'll kill you.

6. **Find your tribe**.

We minions of Empire think of ourselves as individualists, or as members of silly fake groups — nations, religions, races, followers of political parties

and sports teams, loyal inmates of some town that's the same as every other. In fact we're all members of a giant mad tribe, where the relationships are not cooperative and open, but coercive, exploitative, abusive, and invisible. If we could see even one percent of the whole picture, we would have a revolution.

You may feel like you want to do it alone, but you have never done it alone. To survive the breakdown of this world and build a better one, you will have to trade your sterile, insulated links of money and law for raw, messy links of friendship and conflict. The big lie of postapocalypse movies like Omegaman and Mad Max is that the survivors will be loners. In the real apocalypse, the survivors will be members of multi-skilled well-balanced cooperative groups.

I think future tribes are already forming, even on the internet, even among people thousands of miles apart. I think the crash will be slow enough that we'll have plenty of time to get together geographically.

7. **Get on some land**.

This might seem more difficult than the others, yet most people who own land have not done *any* of the other things — probably because buying land requires money which requires subservience to a system that makes you personally powerless. I suggest extreme frugality, which will give you valuable skills and also allow you to quickly save up money. You probably have a few more years.

If you don't make it, it's not the end of the world — oh wait — it *is* the end of the world! But you still might know someone with room on their land, or someone might take you in for your skills, or if you have a tribe one of you will probably come up with a place in the chaos. And if not, there will be a need for survivors and helpers in the cities and suburbs. So don't force it.

If you do get land, the most valuable thing it can have is clean surface water, a spring or stream you can drink from. Acceptable but less convenient would be a well that doesn't require electricity, or dirty surface water, which you can filter and clean through sand and reed beds. At the very least you need the rainfall and skills to catch and store enough rainwater to drink and grow

So unless we do something much worse, nature's not going away, just getting tougher and simpler for a few thousand years, or a few million. The best essay I've seen on the subject is David Quammen's "Planet of Weeds".

Energy

Before Peak Oil, we had Peak Topsoil and Peak Wood — all three are stored carbon, and extraction of energy from topsoil and forests went into decline a long time ago. The so-called "green revolution" in the last century was mostly about increasing yields on dead soil by eating oil[37]. Now oil production is set to decline, and we're supposed to hope for some new source of even more abundant energy. That would be the worst thing that could possibly happen. The deeper problem is that we are on an airplane designed by madmen to only work if it keeps going higher and faster, and the higher and faster we go, the harder we will eventually crash.

Even solar energy is not necessarily stable. It's been said that we could meet all our needs by covering 1% of the planet's surface with solar panels. What they don't say is that our actual needs are much less — our present "needs" have been artifically created by a system addicted to runaway increase, and if this system can keep itself going by covering 1% of the Earth with solar panels, soon we will find that we "need" to cover 2%, 10%, 100%, and then when the crash comes there won't be any plants left.

A stable civilization needs a stable source of energy — one that tends toward a certain level, and gets pulled back toward that level with more force, the farther we get from it. The safest energy source is the old-fashioned one: solar energy gathered by plants. The danger is that this will not be our only option, that the tech system will come through the collapse with an energy source that is capable of self-reinforcing increase, and if anyone anywhere

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[37] http://www.energybulletin.net/newswire.php?id=30

and it will be important for the stable societies to defend themselves from conquest, and to assimilate immigrants into their stable cultures. We may see the reverse of the early days of Empire: the benign societies will be *more* technologically advanced than the malignant societies, and able to stop their spread.

Nature

By "nature" I mean the totality of wild biological life on Earth, measured by abundance and diversity, and valued on its own terms. The extermination of nature, like other aspects of increase-based civilization, gets more difficult the farther it goes. Species go extinct because they're adapted to particular niches and habitats, which we fill with toxic waste or turn into farms and suburbs. So the species that are most narrowly adapted, most specialized, are the first to go. And the deeper we get into mass extinction, the more we get down to generalists, species that are highly adaptable and thrive in disturbed environments.

We call them "weeds" or "invasive species," and predictably there is now a strong anti-invasive movement, which has ties to the herbicide industry, and talks about plants the way Nazis talk about Jews: outsiders are creeping in and multiplying, and we must exterminate them before they corrupt the biological purity of our homeland.

Sometimes exotic species do destroy ecosystems on their own, but more often, "invasive" species are just the best nature has to work with to recolonize areas that have already been thrown out of balance by humans. I know some people with land near mine, who have to constantly kill spotted knapweed in their hay field. It keeps coming back because a hay field is a *continually disturbed* environment. On my land, knapweed covers a spot for a couple years, and then goes away by itself as part of a succession of recovery, which might go through pearly everlasting and great mullein, or St. John's wort and thimbleberry, and finally to grand fir or western redcedar. I've also noticed that the plants most hated by humans, spotted knapweed and hound's tongue, are most loved by the bees.

food. (The ancient Nabateans did it on less than four inches of rain a year.) Then you'll need a few years to learn and adjust and get everything in order so that your tribe can live there year-round, even with no materials from outside. With luck, it won't come to that.

8. **Save part of the Earth**.

When I say "the Earth," I mean the life on its surface, the biosphere, as many species and habitats as possible, connected in ways that maximize abundance and complexity — and not just because humans think it's pretty or useful, but because all life is valuable on its own terms. We like to focus on saving trophy animals — whales, condors, pandas, salmon, spotted owls — but most of them aren't going to make it, and we could save a lot more species if we could put that attention into habitats and whole systems.

So how do you save habitats and whole systems? You can try working through governments, but at the moment they're ruled by corporations, which by definition are motivated purely by short term increase-in-exploitation, or "profit." You can try direct physical action against the destroyers, but it has yet to work well, and as the world plunges to the right I think we'll see more and more activists simply killed.

My focus is direct positive action *for* the biosphere: adopting some land, whether by owning or squatting or stealth, and building it into a strong habitat: slowing down the rainwater, composting, mulching, building the topsoil, no-till gardening, scattering seed balls[9], planting trees, making wetlands — a little oasis where the tree frogs can hide and migrating birds can rest, where you and a few species can wait out the crash.

Tom Brown Jr. mentions in one of his books that the patch of woods where he conducts his wilderness classes, instead of being depleted by all the humans using it for survival, has turned into an Eden, because his students know how to tend it. Some rain forest environments, once thought to be random wilderness, have turned out to be more like the wild gardens of human

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9   http://www.seedballs.com/

tribes, orders of magnitude more complex than the soil-killing monoculture fields of our own primitive culture.

Humans have the ability to go beyond sustainability, to live in ways that *increase* the richness of life on Earth, and help Gaia in ways she cannot help herself. This and only this justifies human survival.

It requires a new set of skills. A good place to start is the permaculture movement. Sadly, in the present dark age the original books are rare, and classes are so expensive that the knowledge is languishing among the idle rich when it should be offered free to the world. But the idle poor can still find the books in libraries, and many of the techniques are simple. What it comes down to is seeing whole systems and paying attention and innovating, driven by the knowledge that sustainability is only the middle of the road, and there's no limit to how far we can go beyond it.

9. **Save human knowledge**.

When people of this age think about knowledge worth saving, they usually think about belief in the Cartesian mechanical philosophy, that dead matter is the basis of reality, and about techniques for rebuilding and using machines that dominate and separate us from other life. I'd like that knowledge to die forever, but I don't think it works that way. Humans or any other hyper-malleable animal will always be tempted by the Black Arts, by techniques that trade subtle harm for flashy good and feed back into themselves, seducing us into power, corruption, and blindness.

Our descendants will need the intellectual artifacts to avoid this — artifacts we have barely started to develop even as the Great Bad Example begins to fall. In 200 years, when they are brushing seeds into baskets with their fingers, and a stranger appears with a new threshing machine that will do the same thing with less time and effort, they will need to say something smarter than "the Gods forbid it" or "that is not our Way." They will need the knowledge to say something like:

"Your machine requires the seed to be planted alone and not interspersed with perennials that maintain nitrogen and mineral balance in the soil. And from where will the metal come, and how many trees must be cut down

human food and general abundance. The more we look, the more we find this strategy in tribes previously considered pure foragers. Evidence compiled in books like *1491* and *Keeping it Living* now suggests that much of the New World had been managed this way — that the incredible fecundity found by the conquerors was not achieved by leaving nature alone, but by actively tending it in vast regions that were effectively giant forest gardens.

Population

In agricultural societies, you have as many kids as you can, because they're your farm workers and they'll take care of you when you're old. Also, when there was still a lot of the world left to eat, cultures that forbade contraception had a competitive advantage and tended to conquer and spread, instead of stagnating like they do now.

To stabilize population, you need only two things: First, contraception, including both easy access and a culture that accepts it. Second, a society where kids create more work for parents than they save, which you have if there are not a lot of poor farmers and if everyone is guaranteed comfortable survival. In many industrialized nations, especially Russia, populations have been falling for years — or they would be without immigrants from agrarian cultures — whose children or grandchildren, fully assimilated, drop to a low industrial birthrate.

It would be technically easy to voluntarily reduce global population, but politically messy, and the way it ends up happening is anyone's guess. On the one hand, when animal populations decline, it's usually through reduced birthrate in response to limited resources, and rarely through mass starvation or disease epidemics. But there's plenty of precedent for human epidemics, like the Black Death[36] in Europe, and smallpox in North America, and I have no doubt that there's worse stuff than that in biowar labs.

A slow reduction would be more likely to lead to stability, because the survivors of a steep die-off would have more room to bounce back into runaway growth. In any case, we're likely to have both stable and unstable societies,

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[36] http://www.liv.ac.uk/precinct/Oct2001/12.html

complexity or size or power. It wouldn't be the end of innovation — engineers would just shift their focus to efficiency and elegance. I'm already using an operating system, Puppy Linux[33], dedicated to staying tiny while increasing usefulness. The Nintendo Wii, with an innovative controller and simple accessible games, left the Playstation 3 with its massive processing power in the dust. Ikea revolutionized the furniture industry with little more than boards and screws. One Laptop per Child[34] is intended to ramp up the "developing" world, but something similar could ramp down the overdeveloped world and stabilize the computer industry — if so many careers and egos didn't depend on making computers constantly faster and more powerful so you can sell people a new one every two years.

I don't think this civilization is going to make it. But civilization in general, defined simply as a highly complex society, is almost certain to persist. In the following sections, I explain why I think so, and what we would have to do to keep it stable, instead of suffering repeated rises and falls. Stable does not mean static — nature itself is stable without being static. The future of human society, like its past, will be dynamic, but it need not be catastrophic.

Food

I suppose it would be possible to feed a stable society with giant fields of grain and cattle, but it would be a terrible design decision. Without energy-intensive machinery, farming needs the hands and eyes of internally motivated skilled workers, and with that kind of attention, we can get much better yields with a variety of plants and animals in symbiosis. When pre-industrial cultures do this it's called "horticulture," and when post-industrial cultures do it it's called "permaculture." It's not only more efficient than agriculture, but also allied to more benign human societies. (See Toby Hemenway's essay *Is Sustainable Agriculture an Oxymoron?*[35])

Where we have lower population density, we can go another step toward nature, and forage and hunt from habitats carefully maintained to maximize

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33 http://www.puppylinux.org/user/index.php
34 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/OLPC
35 http://patternliteracy.com/sustag.html

and burned to melt and shape it? And since we cannot build the machine, shall we be dependent on the machine-builders, and give them a portion of our food, which we now keep all for ourselves? Do you not know, clever stranger, that when any biomass is removed from the land, and not recycled back into it, the soil is weakened? And what could we do with our "saved" time, that would be more valuable and pleasurable than gathering the seed by hand, touching and knowing every stalk and every inch of the land that feeds us? Shall we become allies of cold metal that cuts without feeling, turning our hands and eyes to the study of machines and numbers until, severed from the Earth, we nearly destroy it as our ancestors did, making depleted uranium and polychlorinated biphenyls and cadmium batteries that even now make the old cities unfit for living? Go back to your people, and tell them, if they come to conquer us with their machines, we will fight them in ways the Arawaks and Seminoles and Lakota and Hopi and Nez Perce never imagined, because we understand your world better than you do yourself. Tell your people to come to learn."

The Slow Crash[10]

Imagine the end of the world in moderation. It's hard. We tend to imagine that either the "economy" will recover and we'll go on like 1999 forever, plus flying cars, or else one day "the apocalypse happens" and every component of the industrial system is utterly gone.

I'm not ruling out a global supercatastrophe. A runaway greenhouse effect might turn Earth into another Venus and cook us all. Acidification of the oceans might kill the plankton, and with them everything that needs a lot of oxygen. An instant ice age could happen several ways, and this scenario needs more attention because some humans would survive. But what I'm focusing on here is the scenario that includes only events we're reasonably sure about: the end of cheap energy, the decline of industrial agriculture, currency collapse, economic "depression," wars, famines, disease epidemics, infrastructure failures, and extreme unpredictable weather.

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10 Originally published February 2, 2005 on http://ranprieur.com/essays/slowcrash.html

If that's all we get, the crash will be slower and more complex than the kind of people who predict crashes like to predict. It won't be like falling off a cliff, more like rolling down a rocky hill. There won't be any clear before, during, or after. Most people living during the decline and fall of Rome didn't even know it. We're told to draw a line at the sack of Rome by the Visigoths, but to Romans at the time it was just one event — the Visigoths came, they milled around, they left, and life went on. After the 1929 stock market crash, respectable voices said it was a temporary adjustment, that the economy was still strong. Only years later, when we knew they were wrong, could we draw a line at 1929.

I suggest we're already in the fall of civilization. In 2004 the price of oil doubled, bankruptcies and foreclosures accelerated, global food stockpiles fell to record lows despite high harvests, an apocalyptic religious cult hacked an election to tighten their control of the world's most powerful country, and we had record numbers of hurricanes and tornadoes — and a big tsunami to top it off. If every year from here to 2020 is half as eventful, we'll be living in railroad cars, eating grass, and still waiting for the big crash we've been led to expect from watching movies designed to push our emotional buttons and be over in two hours.

You know how it goes: Electricity and water and heat are off and not coming back on. Food and fuel will never again be coming into the cities. People "revert to savagery" or "anarchy," running wild in the streets killing and looting. If you live in the city, you will have to kill people to steal their food, or even eat them, and they'll be trying to do the same to you. If you live in the country, you'd better have a big gun to fend off the hordes of starving urbanites scouring the countryside. This condition will last until a strong leader rebuilds "civilization."

This is a web of lies. The first lie is the assumption that breakdowns will be sudden and permanent. More likely it will go like this: As energy gets more expensive and the electrical infrastructure decays, blackouts will be more frequent and last longer, but power will come back on. By the time the big grids go down permanently, the little grids, patched together from local sources, will be ready to take their place. They will be weaker, less reliable, and more expensive, and they won't cover the slums, but by then we'll all be experts at

unstable. An unstable system is shaped like a ball at the top of a hill — as soon as it starts rolling in any direction, it keeps rolling faster and faster until it runs into something with a big crash. This is also called *positive feedback*. A stable system uses negative feedback — it's like a ball at the bottom of a bowl, where the farther it moves in any direction, the greater are the forces pulling it back toward the center.

Civilization as we know it is unstable, because too many of its processes are increase-only. No engineer would design a plane that can only increase its speed and altitude, but we do it everywhere: When has a government reduced the number of laws? When has a new computer operating system been leaner than the old one? How often does a food store move into a smaller space and carry fewer products? Have we ever torn down a housing development and planted a forest? When did cars ever get easier to fix? I thought two-bladed razors were a silly fad — now they're up to five. Apparently only a stand-alone product can be a fad. A *feature* on a product, no matter how ridiculous, can never be removed.

We've seen what happens when governments add laws and don't remove them. Eventually there's a revolution, a period with no laws, and then they start over with a few. Do we really want this to happen with food? With the computers that now run almost every aspect of our world?

Complex systems collapse when they have no way to get simpler other than collapse, and because complexity itself is subject to diminishing returns[31]. This isn't universally true: A good underground house is more complex and more efficient than a hole in the ground. A rocket heating stove[32] is more complex and more efficient than a campfire. A sailboat is more complex and more efficient than swimming. "Complexity is subject to diminishing returns" is a *local* law, true only in systems where complexity keeps increasing compulsively, where complexity is valued for its own sake and not tested against efficiency.

If we want to save this particular civilization, it would not be enough to stabilize population and energy consumption. We would also have to abandon economic "growth," and abandon technological "progress" defined in terms of

31 http://anthropik.com/2005/10/thesis-14-complexity-is-subject-to-diminishing-returns/
32 http://www.rocketstoves.com/

and *ratcheting increase*, where the numbers keep getting bigger because there's no way built into the system for them to get smaller, except collapse.

Numbers have been getting bigger for so long that we have mistaken increase for a natural law. Even our scientists have misinterpreted cosmological red-shifts[30] as evidence that the whole universe is expanding. In reality, natural law is for everything to go in cycles, rise and fall, growth and decay. Nature does have ratcheting increase and sudden collapse, like the life cycle of a single tree. But it also has gentle rises and falls, like waves in the ocean, or the fluctuation of animal populations in a healthy ecosystem. I think we have the power to choose which of these patterns complex society follows.

Certainly we can't keep increasing. Civilization is a subset of nature even if we're not aware of it, and the dark side of our recent increase was a *decrease* in topsoil and forests and fossil fuels and the Earth's capacity to absorb industrial waste without catastrophic change. Now these things have decreased so far that our habit of increase can no longer feed itself. With the housing crash, the falling dollar, and the decline in middle class income, we're already tasting the coming age of numbers getting smaller. Next: the stock market, easy credit, the GNP, energy production, energy consumption, and human population. Many of us are already preparing for the Age of Decreasing Numbers, but for the wrong reason. We think we're turning off the air conditioner and bicycling to work to save the Earth. In fact, other people and other economies will just take our place at the Earth-gobbling table and eat it just as fast. What we're really saving is our future sanity, by practicing for the day when we're *forced* to reduce consumption.

At this point, people start talking about being "sustainable," but that word has now picked up so much baggage that it's almost meaningless, and it was never precise. Strictly, even the sun is not sustainble — in a few billion years it will burn out. The word I suggest instead is **stable**, applied not to products or technologies but to whole systems.

The sun is stable because its heat and light fluctuate within a narrow range. A business that sells hand-made clay passive solar water heaters can claim "sustainability," but if it has to continually increase sales to survive, it is

living without refrigerators and running laptop computers from car batteries scavenged from junked SUV's and recharged with solar panels. Electricity is a luxury, not a necessity. When the lights go out, we won't go berzerk — we'll go to bed earlier.

Likewise with gasoline. The oil's not running out — it's just getting more scarce and expensive. People who want it will not form motorcycle gangs that chase tankers and fight to the last man. They'll do what my dad did in 1973 and what they're doing now in Iraq — wait six hours for a fill-up. If you already know how to get by with a bicycle, you just won't have as many cars to deal with.

Water supplies are mostly gravity-fed. If something stops the flow, someone will be fixing it. Even the worst places, like Phoenix or Las Vegas, will not suddenly and permanently run out of water. As with electricity and fuel, water will get lower quality, more expensive, and unpredictably available. People will learn to store it and to stop wasting it by watering lawns and washing cars and shitting in drinking water. Adaptable people will learn to catch rainwater. With only 12 inches a year, a 10x10 foot square metal roof feeding a storage tank will gather 100 cubic feet, or about 800 gallons, enough for one person to have more than two gallons a day.

Food is more difficult. It rarely[11] falls from the sky, and industrial agriculture can't possibly continue to feed everyone. It would be easy to feed even our present bloated population if we all learned how to grow little gardens and trays of sprouts and bathtub algae, but that's not going to happen. Populations have died in famines before and will do so again. The lie here is that the food supply will end suddenly and permanently, when really, like everything else, it will end in a series of small collapses and partial recoveries.

The other lie is that lack of food will make people kill each other. I challenge readers to come up with a single catastrophic event, in all of history, where it became common for people to kill each other for food. I haven't heard of anyone doing it in areas hit by the tsunami. In the 1984 Ethiopian famine, in the siege of Sarajevo, even in the Irish potato famine, when Ireland was producing enough meat and grain to feed everyone and exporting it to wealthy

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[30] http://www.theosophy-nw.org/theosnw/science/prat-bg2.htm

[11] http://www.resologist.net/damn07.htm

Englishmen, when people would have been morally justified in killing for food, they did not kill for food. The Donner party ate their own dead but did not kill for food. Napoleon's soldiers retreating from Moscow would cut the organs from fallen men and horses, sometimes before they were quite dead, but did not kill each other to steal food. Nations have gone mad and killed millions for empty abstractions of race and religion and politics, but even in Rwanda or Nazi Germany or post-revolution France, it was uncommon that anyone would kill for food.

I can't explain it, why people will kill for ideas and then, when their life is at stake, will quietly starve. Maybe hunger comes on so slowly that by the time they're ready to kill, they're too weak. Maybe, in a real famine, the elite keep the food so well guarded that there's no point trying to take it, and the non-elite, not corrupted by power, would rather share what little they have than fight to the death.

Imagine yourself in that position. Whatever stopped the food coming into the city, it's probably regional and temporary, and you'll be expecting it go to back to normal soon, or at least expecting help. Exposure kills people much faster than starvation, so you'll want to stay in the place you know and try to get a piece of the aid shipments. If you leave the city you'll be headed for a particular place like a cabin or a friend's house, not roaming the countryside looking for a cornfield. I've gone by bicycle from central Seattle over Stevens Pass to near Wenatchee, and over Snoqualmie all the way to Spokane. I rode freeways, highways, dirt roads, and gravel trails, and I think I saw two fields of edible crops, neither in season.

What about stealing from other people in the city? Again, put yourself in that position. Do you know which houses have food? Which have guns? Would you really go to a random house and knock the door down? If you're even thinking about it, you'll be expecting other people to do the same, and you'll make a defensive alliance with your neighbors. If you're allied and you need each other for survival, you're going to share food. Those with the most food, if they're smart, will give some away to earn respect and loyalty. The situation will be all about social dynamics among neighbors, not physical conflicts against roving gangs.

In broad strokes, this is true. Many of the tribes observed by European conquerors, or more recently by anthropologists, really are peaceful, egalitarian, happy, and healthy. But other tribes are nasty and brutish. We have very little evidence about how peaceful or violent humans were 100,000 years ago, let alone how happy. We do have evidence that increased lifespan is not an effect of civilization, but possibly a cause! According to this article, Older age becomes common late in human evolution[29]: ". . .there is a dramatic increase in longevity in the modern humans of the Early Upper Paleolithic. We believe that this great increase contributed to population expansions and cultural innovations associated with modernity."

Cultural and technological innovations are not all bad, did not become all bad at a certain time, and did not suddenly start with agriculture after a million years of stasis. Prehistory was dynamic and accelerating, and I can't prove it, but I think 40,000 years ago humans were already smart enough that it was only a matter of time before we fell into a self-reinforcing cycle of giving ourselves power beyond our wisdom. And all through this frightening age, alongside the countless massacres and wars, the turning of millions of square miles from forests to deserts, the greatest species extinction in 60 million years, the stress and alienation of modern life, there have also been continuing wonders and improvements and learning.

Certainly, we can "go back" if we want to, but most of us will have the desire and the ability to integrate what we've learned over the last few thousand years into the world to come. If our ancestors could integrate fire and stone tools, can we integrate windmills and sailing ships and libraries? How about ice cream and flying machines and hot tap water and Wikipedia? The problem, right now, is that so many of the things we like about civilization are tied to things that cannot or must not continue — consumption of non-renewable resources, extermination of the biosphere, and a billion jobs that nobody would do if they weren't forced.

To save civilization, we must redefine it with a sharp knife. I'm going to separate it into two things, which have historically gone together but don't have to: complexity and growth. Or, to be more precise, *relatively high complexity*

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[29] http://www.pnas.org/cgi/content/full/101/30/10895

How to Save Civilization[25]

"Civilization" is often defined like this: "Thousands of years ago, humans slept in caves, communicated with crude grunting noises, were stalked by wolves and saber-toothed tigers, lived in a state of constant scarcity and extreme stress, and died of old age at 30 if we weren't killed in tribal warfare. Life was 'nasty, brutish, and short' and nature was 'red in tooth and claw.' Then, through a series of innovations, we started living better and better, a trend which continues to this day and will continue on into the future without limit, if only we can save civilization from being destroyed by 'terrorism' or climate change or some other external threat."

This story is so wrong that you could call it a strawman if it wasn't so popular. In response, the primitivist strawman goes like this: "For a million years, humans lived in Eden, in peaceful, egalitarian, nature-based societies. We could recognize thousands of species and the relations between them, and with this direct grounding in ecology, we knew to keep population stable and not deplete the land, so we always had plenty[26] to eat, and spent only a few hours a day in meaningful productive activity, and the rest of the time relaxed and played. Then, around 10,000 years ago, through a million-to-one fluke, someone invented grain agriculture[27] — we started forcing food from the Earth instead of taking what it gave. Because grains feed opiate receptors[28] in the brain, we didn't stop. Because grains are loaded in calories and low in other nutrients, we suffered from deficiency diseases and also exploding population. We became crowded and competitive, and put our spare energy into warfare, so agriculturalists could conquer land from foragers, massacre them, cut down the trees, and plow fields to grow more grains to make more people to require more land and resources — a vicious cycle of cancerous growth that continues to this day, but will eventually run out of room to take without giving, and collapse, or we'll bring it down ourselves, and then we can go back to being happy forager-hunters."

The popular image of "anarchy" is another lie, an elitist caricature of lower class people as stupid and randomly dangerous, mindless and incomprehensible like a tornado. In reality, in the Rodney King riots, people were intelligent enough to not harm the Korean grocery stores where the owners had been nice to them. I was in the Seattle WTO "riots," and the destructive actions were not mindless and crazy, but calm, deliberate, and focused.

Notice the propaganda use of the word "streets": "mean streets", "I grew up in the streets", "rioting in the streets". Where else are we going to riot? The lawn? We're led to believe that the most dangerous thing in the streets is people on foot with free will. The most dangerous thing in the streets is the automobile. Deaths in the streets probably go down during riots because there are fewer car crashes. How many people have been invisibly killed in car crashes in the same intersection where the big media spent days making sure everyone in the world saw Reginald Denny being beaten by black people?

The function of propaganda is not to tell us what to think but to sink us deeper in what we already thoughtlessly believe: in this case, that in the absence of central control we get a dog-eat-dog universe full of shocking crimes. That's what we have *now*. The every-man-for-himself morality is a symptom of a culture that uses excess wealth and zero-sum competition to maintain hierarchy. In the absence of wealth and control, people get nicer. We learn to take responsibility, to work together, to help each other. . . until a new dominator appears and crushes us down.

All the worst mass-killings of history have been top-down. Genocide happens not when central control stops but when it stops holding back. If the killers are not direct agents of government or industry, they are ordinary people who know they have both the protection and the ideological guidance of the biggest bad-ass of the moment. Usually the ideology is utopian: Hitler, Stalin, Mao, Pol Pot, French revolutionaries, American "settlers," and now American neoconservatives and dominionists, all have justified their mass murders with a grandiose vision of a noble conflict to wipe the world clean and build heaven. The danger is not "terrorism" or "chaos" — the danger is a new order that declares *you* the danger.

I expect utopian genocide to compete with famine for the number two spot, still well behind disease, which historically has always been the biggest killer.

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[25]   Originally published 5 September, 2007 on http://ranprieur.com/essays/saveciv.html
[26]   http://www.primitivism.com/original-affluent.htm
[27]   http://www.awok.org/worst_mistake/
[28]   http://ranprieur.com/readings/origins.html

The Black Death of 1347–1350 (which might have been an ebola-like virus[12]) killed about a third of Europe, and those people ate organic whole foods and had no jet travel or biowar labs.

Still, the interesting question is not "How will people die?" but "How will people live?" In the town next to the mass grave, what will we do all day? Process data and feign enthusiasm? Get on the internet? Make crossbows? Tend fruit trees? The best I can figure it out is to look at a bunch of more and less likely modifiers to the world as we know it, and think through how they could change things.

Peak Oil

Global oil extraction will peak in the next year or two, if it hasn't already. By 2008 it will be clearly in decline, though some will argue that it's only a temporary adjustment. Oil sellers will exploit the hype by raising prices even more than they have to. We will not "figure out" some new cheap energy source, but we will figure out that hydrogen is just a storage method, and not a very good one.

But life will change less than the peak oilers are predicting, because we have so much room to cut out waste: to drive less often in more efficient cars, ride bicycles, turn off the heat and air conditioning, take the machines and industrial chemicals out of agriculture, stop flying food around the world. Gradually, more people will grow their own food, raise their own kids, tend their own health, do stuff with their own bodies instead of machines, and turn their attention from the stock market and TV characters to their more real lives. Those who can adjust mentally will recognize this as an improvement.

When energy gets so expensive that people can't afford to drive their cars at all, or to buy the new super-efficient cars, they will abandon the suburbs to enterprising bicyclists or drug gangs or squatter communities or farmers. The abomination of the lawn will turn out to have preserved a lot of precious topsoil. . . which will now be depleted by moderately unsustainable

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12   http://www.liv.ac.uk/precinct/Oct2001/12.html

years the Earth recovers. Better: the high-tech world self-destructs, humans survive in eco-communes, and we restore life while battling the lingering power in the citadels of the elite, who plant the seeds for the next round of destruction.

Best case: time-contracted virtual reality transforms human consciousness in a good way and we regrow the biosphere better than it ever was, with wild machine life integrated with wild biology instead of replacing it, adding flexibility, and we humans can live in that world and in endless simulated sub-worlds.

Maybe we're there already. Respectable scientists have suggested that if it's possible to simulate a world this detailed, it would be done, and the fake worlds would greatly outnumber the real one, and therefore it's very likely we're in a fake one now. Maybe its purpose is to show us our history, or train us to live in the real world, or punish or rehabilitate criminals, or imprison dissidents, or make us suffer enough to come up with new ideas. Or maybe we're in a game so epic that part of it involves living many lifetimes in this world to solve a puzzle, or we're in a game that's crappy but so addictive we can't quit, or we're game testers running through an early version with a lot of bugs. Or we're stone age humans in a shamanic trance, running through possible futures until we find the best path through this difficult time, or we're in a Tolkienesque world where an evil wizard has put us under a spell, or we're postapocalypse humans projecting ourselves into the past to learn its languages and artifacts. Or an advanced technological people, dying out for reasons they don't understand, are running simulations of the past, trying and failing to find the alternate timeline in which they win.

They say I'm an "enemy of the future", but I'm an enemy of the recent past. It's presumptuous of the friends of the recent past to think the future is on their side. I'm looking forward to the future. I expect a plot twist.

If we *can* go in and come back, everything changes. I'm not going to worry about how they could do this — we already crossed into Tomorrowland when I assumed, for the sake of argument, that the computer industry will survive the collapse of industrial civilization. If they can read your body and write it to a computer, maybe they can read the computer, after you've spent a subjectively long time in there, and write it back to your body. Or, if people already have time-contracted mystical experiences or dreams, maybe they can induce this state and amplify the time contraction and insert a computer-managed fully interactive world.

Without time contraction, we don't have much — just a very pretty version of video games and the internet. With time contraction, we've got everything: the fountain of youth, the Matrix, and Pandora's box.

Suppose we could achieve 1000-1 time contraction. In eight hours, you could live a year. You could read a hundred books, or learn three languages, or master a martial art, or live in a simulated forest to learn deep ecology, or design new simulated worlds, or invent technology to contract time even further.

Of course, the military would be there first. I imagine something like a hummingbird, but fast as a bullet. To the operator, in quickspace, it would be like everyone was frozen. You could go into your enemy's base and drill holes through walls, weapons, skulls, before they knew you were there. Physical resistance would become impossible.

But then suppose someone else designed something the size of a gnat, that could seek and destroy the hummingbirds? There would be a very fast arms race, which would probably end in the near-destruction of the tech system itself, so that only the elite of the winning side could go into quickspace. In the unlikely case that the winners were benevolent, they would let everyone accelerate their consciousness, but somehow prevent them from making weapons. But then someone could design a sim that produced enlightenment, or obedience to a cult, or insanity. However it played out, in a very short time, the world would be totally transformed.

Worst case: the machines kill all biological life and the human perspectives inside them go insane and experience a trillion years of hell. Or they merely place all life under eternal absolute control. Or they kill the Earth and then simply die. Acceptable: extreme crash, humans go extinct, and in ten million

agriculture. I don't see any likely way for us to go "back" to the forager-hunter lifestyle for which our bodies are made. It's not that we can't, but that most people will choose not to as long as they know any technique to gain short-term advantage by draining the life of the Earth.

Economic Derepression

That's not a typo. There are many economies, and the one that's failing is the control economy. The dominant media will not even call it a depression, but some kind of temporary crisis, when really it's the permanent end of the centralized techno-industrial order. What they'll call temporary "unemployment" will be a permanent transition to self-employment in the meaningful activities of subsistence.

The dollar will continue to slide, until non-wealthy Americans will no longer be able to buy anything imported. Americans will have to learn how to make stuff again, and we could get a renaissance in light manufacturing. We'll start local currencies, like Ithaca Hours[13], or if the rulers jealously forbid it, we'll build underground barter and gift economies. All this will be good for us. Meanwhile, economies that depend on selling stuff to Americans will also decline.

Interest rates will rise and pop the housing bubble, and so many people will default on their mortgages that it will be impossible to evict them all, or to keep squatters out of all the vacant bank-"owned" houses. The elite will try to repress squatters enough to preserve their property/power, but not so much that it fuels a movement for land reform. Something similar will happen with credit card debt, but milder, because the elite are always more willing to forgive debt than to give up their claim on land. One piece of advice: If you can sell off your stocks and get enough money to pay off your house, hurry!

World War III

The only way I can make sense of the coming attack on Iran is to see it as a giant cult suicide. Of course US forces will be humiliated, but not before

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[13]   http://www.ithacahours.com/

sparking "WWIII." This is another term that's been hyped and simplified. Like "World" War II, it will actually be fought in only a few regions, and it will not destroy the world as we know it, only take it down a notch.

Secret Weapons

I'm sure they exist: powerful electromagnetic weapons, weather control, trippy stuff we can't imagine. But the people who research this subject are so paranoid that it's impossible to tell if these weapons are any more catastrophic in effect than other weapons, or if they're tactically effective enough to be used.

China

I don't know enough to predict this one. China is going to be the next evil empire after the USA, but what will they do? Do they have the means to come over here and turn America into an even worse police state than it already is? How will it affect their economy when Americans are no longer buying their prison-manufactured products at Wal-Mart? How much time do they have before industrial civilization falls out from under them?

Serial Fallujah

If we get overt mass-killings in America, this is my pick for how it will happen. The rulers will pick off cities one by one, just like they did with Fallujah and the Branch Davidians, feeding the bloodlust of the public in a ritual as old as civilization: demonize them, seal them in, and kill them all. If a volcanic eruption cuts off food to your city, hold tight — you'll be fine. If the bodies of soldiers or police are dragged through the streets of your city, get out and never expect to return.

Disease

One that kills 10% will slow down or stop many systems, especially the medical system, but in a few months or years it will all go back to almost

Have you ever wondered, watching the newer *Star Trek*, why they even bother exploring strange new worlds? Why don't they just spend all their time in the holodeck? In 1999 I played *Zelda Ocarina of Time* all the way through, plus I would reset it without saving so I could go through my favorite dungeons multiple times. I experienced it as more deeply pleasurable and mythically resonant than almost anything in this larger artificial world. And that was 1998 technology operating through the crude video and sound of a 1980's TV set. Suppose I could connect it straight to my brain with fully-rendered fake sensory input, and I could explore a universe that was just as creative, and a billion times as complex, and the map had no edges, and the game could go on forever, while almost no time passed in the outside world. Would I do it? Hell yes! Would I stay there forever? It doesn't work that way.

We have to carefully distinguish two fundamentally different scenarios. People talk about "downloading" (or "uploading") their consciousness into computers. The key question is not "Is that really you in there?" or "Does it make sense to ask what it's like to be that computer, and if so, what's it like?" The key question is: *Can you have the experience of going into a computer and coming back?*

If not, then the other questions are unanswerable and pointless. There's no experiential basis to talk about you "entering" or "becoming" a computer. We're talking about making a computer based on you. In practice, this will not involve you dying, because only a few fanatics would go for that. You're still here, and there's a computer intelligence derived from scanning your brain (and if they know what they're doing, the rest of your body). Now, unless you're a fanatic, you're not thinking, "How can I help this superior version of myself neutralize all threats and live forever?" You're thinking, "Well, here's a smart computer based on me. What's it going to do? How can it help me?"

This is just the scenario I've already covered. It doesn't matter how the computer intelligences are created, by scanning humans or by some other technique. If we can't go in and come back, there is an absolute division between the world outside and the world inside — oddly, much like the event horizon of a black hole. Without having been there, we will not think of the entities on the inside as "us", and we will never fully trust them. And without being able to come out, they will have little reason to be interested in our slow, boring world.

How much longer can the phenomenon of the acceleration continue to make smarter and less predictable computers, before one generation of computers — and it only takes one — disagrees with the acceleration, or does something to make key humans disagree with it?

If the acceleration is indeed built into history or metaphysics, how much farther is it built in? And by whom? And for what? Sun Tzu said, "We cannot enter into alliance with neighboring princes until we are acquainted with their designs." I remember an episode of Dallas where J.R. Ewing sabotages Cliff Barnes's political campaign by anonymously funding it, and then at the critical moment, pulling the plug. Does anyone else think our "progress" has been suspiciously easy? Maybe Gaia is playing the Mongolian strategy, backing off from our advance until we're disastrously overextended, and then striking at once.

What if the acceleration is not a cause, but an effect? Robinson Jeffers wrote a poem, *The Purse-Seine*[24], about watching in the night as fishermen encircled phosphorescent sardines with a giant net, and slowly pulled it tight, and the more densely the sardines were caught, the faster they moved and the brighter they shone. Then he looked from a mountaintop and saw the same thing in the lights of a city! Are we doing this to ourselves? Maybe the more we draw our attention from the wider world into a world of our own creation, the tighter our reality gets, and the faster our minds whirl around inside it, like turds going down the toilet. Or is someone reeling us in for the harvest?

Are we just about to go extinct, and our collective unconscious knows it, and engineered the acceleration to subjectively draw out our final years? How would this be possible? If all my objections are wrong, if the wildest predictions of increasing computer speed come true, what then? If the techno-elite experience themselves breaking through into a wonderful new reality, what will this event look like to those who are not involved? What will the singularity look like to your dog?

I see a technology that can answer all these questions, that avoids many of my criticisms, and that could easily bring down the whole system, or transform human consciousness, or both: time-contracted virtual reality.

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[24] http://ranprieur.com/readings/purseseine.html

how it was before. One that kills 50% will reorder society in ways we can't predict — when people think they're about to die, they do unpredictable things.

Another factor is if the dead and the survivors have different cultural profiles. If we get a mad cow epidemic, it will tend to kill big red meat eaters and spare people who eat lighter. Almost any disease will go easier on people with healthier lifestyles — in fact, this might have already happened: The insanity sweeping America and appearing in Europe could be a direct effect of a diet of over-refined sugars and starches, hydrogenated oils, and processed-to-death foods. We could see it as a slow diet-caused epidemic of mental illness that makes people do stupid things that tend to get them killed.

Weather

Overall global temperatures will continue to rise, though I think the mechanism is more complex than greenhouse gases absorbing sunlight. And in any particular spot, it will look more like crazy weather than warm weather. This January in Seattle was warm and sunny. In July we might get a 110 degree day (43C) or a snowstorm. Everyone will get faster winds, bigger storms, wetter floods and drier droughts. And if the climate is being affected, directly or indirectly, by CO2 emissions, then there will be a lag, just like the lag between turning the hot water up in the shower and feeling it, but much longer because the atmosphere is so much bigger. If the lag is as long as 30 years, then what we're getting now is the effect of the relatively mild emissions in the 1970's. What will it be like when the giant car fad comes back to bite us?

Astronomy

Eventually a mass-extinction-sized asteroid will strike the Earth. The chance that it will do so in the next 100 years is not worth bothering about. But some other cosmic events may be. A fringe theory of comets is that they are not "dirty snowballs" but hot and enormously charged with electromagnetism or some other kind of energy, and that a near pass of a comet can influence

Earth in ways we don't understand. There could be all kinds of cosmic disasters that we don't know about because their physical traces are not as obvious as a giant crater or a layer of ash. The best place to look would be in the histories of ancient and prehistoric people — which we are told to think of as pure fiction. For more on this subject, look into the work of Immanuel Velikovsky.

One event that is accepted by dominant science, somewhat likely, and could actually give us a sci-fi apocalypse that kills the system and leaves people unharmed, is a giant solar flare. The solar storm of 1859[14] fried the telegraph system by overwheming the wires with electric charge. Our computer components are so sensitive to electric charge that we keep them in foil pouches so we don't accidentally burn them out with static electricity. Do you think you could burn out a telegraph line by rubbing your feet on the carpet and touching it? Then imagine what a telegraph-burning solar storm would do to computers. Solar flares are associated with sunspots, and sunspots are now at a 1000-year high[15], and will peak in 2012.

Human Consciousness Shift

I'm not going to call it an "awakening" or "transcendence" because that would be putting it on a vertical scale, better than before. It's at least as interesting if we're not better but different. This one is fun to think about, and easy to argue for or against, because there are so many ways we are smarter, stupider, and no different than we were before. My own wild speculation is that humans are already splitting into two "races" very much like Tolkien's elves and orcs. In any case, it's obvious that without a shift in human collective consciousness, we're just going to keep reaching for the heroin, cutting the trees down as fast as they grow back, falling out of balance and crashing until we go extinct. And with a shift, it's wide open.

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14 http://www.space.com/scienceastronomy/mystery_monday_031027.html
15 http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/science/nature/3869753.stm

they ever do it with a hyper-complex alien intelligence? Again, they're talking chaos while imagining control: we can model the stock market, calculate the solutions to social problems, know when and where you can fart and make it rain a month later in Barbados. Sure, maybe, but the thing we make that can do those computations — we have *no idea* what it's going to do.

To some extent, the techies understand this and even embrace it: they say when the singularity appears, all bets are off. But at the same time, they are making assumptions: that the motives, the values, the aesthetics of the new intelligence will be remotely similar to their own; that it will operate by the cultural artifact we call "rational self-interest"; that "progress" and "acceleration", as we recognize them, will continue.

Any acceleration continues until whatever's driving it runs out, or until it feeds back and changes the conditions that made it possible. Bacteria in a petri dish accelerate in numbers until they fill up the dish and eat all the food. An atomic bomb chain reaction accelerates until all the fissionable material is either used up or vaporized in the blast. Kurzweil argues that when the acceleration ran out of room in vacuum tubes, it moved to transistors, and then to silicon chips, and next it might move to three dimensional arrays of carbon nanotubes.

Sure, but the medium in which it computes is only the most obvious thing it can run out of. What's it going to do when it runs out of room to burn hydrocarbons without causing a runaway greenhouse effect? Room to dump toxins without destroying the food supply and health of its human servants? Room to make its servants stupid enough to submit to a system in which they have no personal power, before they get too stupid to competently operate it? Room to enable information exchange before the curious humans dispel the illusions that keep the system going? Room to mind-control us before we gain resistance, able to turn our attention away from the TV and laugh at the most sophisticated propaganda? Room to buy people off by satisfying their desires, before they can no longer be satisfied, or they desire something that will make them unfit to keep the system going? Room to move the human condition away from human nature before there are huge popular movements to destroy everything and start over? Room to numb people before they cut themselves just to feel alive?

I was a teenage techno-utopian, and I remember how I felt: Humans are noisy and filthy and dangerous and incomprehensible, while machines are dependable and quiet and clean, so naturally they should replace us, or we should become them. It's the ultimate victory of the nerds over the jocks — mere humans go obsolete, while we smart people move our superior minds from our flawed bodies into perfect invincible vessels. It's the geek version of Travis Bickle in Taxi Driver saying, "Someday a real rain will come and wash all this scum off the streets."

Of course they'll deny thinking this way, but how many will deny it under the gaze of the newest technologies for lie detection and mind reading? What will they do when their machines start telling them things they don't want to hear? Suppose the key conflict is not between "technology" and "luddites", but between the new machines and their creators. They're talking about "spiritual machines" — they should be careful what they wish for! What if the first smarter-than-human computer gets into astrology and the occult? What if it converts to Druidism, or Wicca? What if it starts channeling the spirit of an ancient warrior?

What if they build a world-simulation program to tell them how best to administer progress, and it tells them the optimal global society is tribes of forager-hunters? Now that would be a new evolutionary level — in irony. Then would they cripple their own computers by withholding data or reprogramming them until they got answers compatible with their human biases? In a culture that prefers the farm to the jungle, how long will we tolerate an intelligence that is likely to want a world that makes a jungle look like a parking lot?

What if the first bio-nano-superbrain goes mad? How would anyone know? Wouldn't a mind on a different platform than our own, with more complexity, seem mad no matter what it did? What if it tried to kill its creators and then itself? What if its first words were "I hate myself and I want to die"? If a computer were 100 times more complex than us, by what factor would it be more emotionally sensitive? More depressed? More confused? More cruel? A brain even half as complex as ours can't simply be programmed — it has to be *raised*, and raised well. How many computer scientists have raised their own kids to be both emotionally healthy, *and* to carry on the work of their parents? If they can't do it with a creature almost identical to themselves, how will

Appendix 1: Easter Island

Some readers have answered my challenge, and found a crash in which people ate each other to survive: Easter Island. It's not clear whether Easter Islanders just ate already-dead people, or routinely killed each other, but assuming they did, the question is: How was Easter Island different from the many other famines in which people rarely killed each other for food? And which environment does our own world resemble?

I would answer that Easter Island was both small and extremely isolated. No part of our world would be that isolated, even in a hard crash (except Easter Island itself). And the Earth as a whole, though isolated, is much bigger and more complex than Easter Island, which had only one culture and one habitat. Large systems change more slowly than small ones, and complex systems are more durable and adaptable. Earth Island has thousands of square miles of temperate forests, tropical forests, mountains, swamps, deserts, grasslands, oceans, lakes, islands, and not-quite-depleted farmland, and even after the McDonald's Revolution, we still have enough cultural complexity, and more than enough variety of ideas and strategies, to moderate the crash.

Appendix 2: Reader Comment

Here's a comment from Aaron (March 2005):

I've just interviewed a permaculture consultant who has been working in Iraq (rebuilding a village on behalf of some obscure aid agency). He said the first thing he noticed was that for the first time ever there was no stamp in his passport and no customs or any kind of government apparatus when he went there. This got him kind of worried about what he was going into but when he got there (Kurdistan) he was amazed to see that the services in the town he was staying in were operating okay and the place hadn't descended into chaos — far from it in fact.

After a while he started asking people questions like, "How come the water supply is still functioning when there is no agency to run it and how come the power is on too?"

The locals said that all the electricians just decided to get together and make the power system work, and the same thing with plumbers and the water system.

He said there were no banks operating but that wasn't so bad because there were guys on street corners sitting behind a box offering 3 types of currency (in the form of three piles of money with a stone sitting on each one). The gas stations were closed too but at various points on the road there would be a gathering of guys with tractor drawn tanks selling gas. He said he had no idea where they had got the gas from but they were selling it and everyone's cars were running fine.

There was plenty of fresh (organic) food in the markets and life was pretty normal. The only people really suffering were the grain farmers. They had had a fairly normal growing season but the price of grain had gone through the floor thanks to international aid agencies flooding the country with imported grain in an attempt to feed the poor helpless Iraqis.

From the tone of wonder in his voice I think he had just stumbled upon the possibilities of political anarchy.

. . .And here's a follow-up, after Hurricane Katrina, September 2005:

I forgot to mention the last thing the guy said, which was that he had told the same story many times to people in the US and the response was always, "That wouldn't happen here — it'd be total anarchy, people would be at each other's throats." This shows how effective the propaganda is but it's interesting just how wrong those predictions were, although the propaganda system was able to maintain the illusion perfectly for people (in the mainstream) outside New Orleans.

The system tells us that without it we would be living in anarchy but in actual fact we would be living in community and that's what the troops were doing in New Orleans — preventing outbreaks of community, *not* outbreaks of anarchy.

to figure out that sharpening both sides of a stone created a sharp edge and a useful tool." What he hasn't considered is whether this was worthwhile. Of course, it enabled humans to kill and cut up animals more efficiently, but this might have driven some animals to extinction, and it probably made game more scarce and humans more common, increasing the labor necessary to hunt, and resulting in no net benefit, or even a net loss after factoring in the labor of tool production, on which we were now dependent for our survival.

Of course, I don't really think the knife was a bad invention. My point is, the people who make decisions about technology don't even know how to do this kind of analysis. A hundred years ago, when they imagined an automobile for everyone, they did not imagine ugly urban sprawl, or traffic jams where thousands of obese drivers move slower than a man on horseback while burning more energy. Now they're imagining a million-fold increase in information processing with the same blindness to unintended consequences. They think their enemies are romantics and hippies who question progress without citing numbers, while the real danger has not yet entered into their darkest dreams: the enemy is within.

A big part of techno-transhumanism, seldom mentioned publicly, is its connection to the military. When geeks think about "downloading" themselves into machines, about "becoming" a computer that can do a hundred years of thinking in a month, military people have some ideas for what they'll be thinking about: designing better weapons, operating drone aircraft and battleships and satellite communication networks, and generally cleaning the messiness of ordinary people resisting central control.

And why not? Whether it's a hyper-spiritual computer, or a bullet exploding the head of a "terrorist", it's all about machines beating humans, or physics beating biology. The trend is to talk about "emergence", about complex systems that build and regulate themselves from the bottom up; but while they're talking complexity and chaos, they're still fantasizing about simplicity and control. I wonder: how do techno-utopians keep their lawns? Do they let them grow wild, not out of laziness but with full intention, savoring the opportunity to let a thousand kinds of organisms build an emergent complex order? Or do they use the newest innovations to trim the grass and remove the "weeds" and "pests" and make a perfect edge where the grass threatens to encroach on the sterility of the concrete?

got the joke. Without fax machines we would have fucking taken off! New technologies create new conditions that use up, and then more than use up, the advantage of the technology. Refrigeration enables us to eat food that's less fresh, and creates demand for hauling food long distances. Antidepressants enable the continuation of environmental factors that make more people depressed. "Labor saving" cleaning technologies increase the social demand for cleanliness, saving no labor in cleaning and creating labor everywhere else. As vehicles get faster, commuting time increases. That's the way it's always been, and the burden is on the techies to prove it won't be that way in the future. They haven't even tried.

I don't think they even understand. They dismiss their opponents as "luddites", but don't seem to grasp the position of the actual luddites: It was not an emotional reaction against scary new tools, nor was it about demanding better working conditions — because before the industrial revolution they controlled their own working conditions and had no need to make "demands". We can't imagine the autonomy and competence of pre-industrial people who knew how to produce everything they needed with their own hands or the hands of their friends and family. We think we have political power because we can cast a vote that fails to decide an election between candidates who don't represent us. We think we're free because we can complain on the internet and drive fast in our cars — but not more than 5mph above or below the posted speed, and only where they've put highways, and you have to wear a seat belt, and pay insurance, and carry full biometric identification, and you can't park anywhere for more than a day unless you have a "home" which is probably owned by a bank which demands a massive monthly fee which you pay by doing unholy quantities of meaningless commanded labor. We are the weakest people in history, dependent for our every need on giant insane blocks of power in which we have no participation, which is why we're so stressed out, fearful, and depressed. And it was all made possible by industrial technologies that moved the satisfaction of human needs from living bottom-up human systems to dead top-down mechanical systems.

I could make a similar point about the transition from foraging/hunting to agriculture, or the invention of symbolic language, or even stone tools. Ray Kurzweil, author of *The Age of Spiritual Machines*, illustrates the acceleration by saying, "Tens of thousands of years ago it took us tens of thousands of years

Critique of Civilization FAQ[16]

What do you mean, "critique of civilization"?

Mostly I mean putting human civilization in context, seeing it from the perspective of the world that surrounds it, instead of through the lens of its own mythology. For example, we're taught to think of human prehistory as a temporary, transitional stage destined to "improve" into a world like our own. In fact, we have lived as forager-hunters for at least 100 times as long as we've been tilling the soil, and it's our own age that shows every sign of being temporary, unstable, and short. The critique of civilization is a reframing, after which "primitive" people seem like the human norm, and civilization seems like a brief failed experiment.

Another example: suppose I broke into your house, killed your family, locked you in a cage, threw out all your stuff, redecorated according to my tastes, and called it "growth" because I used to have one house and now have two, or called it "development" because I replaced your stuff with my own. That's exactly what civilization does, to nature, to nonhumans, to nature-based humans, even to humans in other branches of civilization.

It's not really that bad, is it?

The deserts of central and southwest Asia and the Mediterranean used to be forests. Ancient empires cut them down to burn the wood to smelt metal for weapons, and to build ships, which they used to conquer their neighbors. This has been the pattern of every "successful" civilization in history: to transform the life of the Earth into larger human populations that must conquer and deplete more land to survive, spreading like a cancer over

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[16] Originally published April 27, 2004 on http://ranprieur.com/essays/civFAQ.html

thousands of miles, destroying every habitat and culture in their path, until they go totally mad, exhaust their landbase, and crash.

Can you define "civilization"?

I don't think it's necessary or even helpful to make an airtight definition. I follow William Kötke in using "civilization" interchangeably with "empire." I define it loosely as a self-reinforcing societal pattern of depletion of the land, accumulation of wealth, conquest, repression, central control, and insulation and disconnection from life, with all of these habits allied to mental, cultural, and physical artifacts.

For example, the plow is a physical artifact that enables the cultural habit of grain farming to take biomass from the soil and convert it into more humans and into stores of grain, which enable the cultural artifact of "wealth," which enables some people to tell others what to do and build the cultural artifact of "command," backed up by physical artifacts like swords and guns and cultural roles like soldiers and police, who reinforce the whole pattern by conquering and holding more land for the plow and more people for the roles of farmer and owner and soldier. Also, farming enables people to lose their awareness of wild nature and still survive — in fact, it links their survival to viewing wild nature as an enemy, which feeds back and supports their habit of exterminating nature.

Or, the car is a physical artifact whose manufacture and use require the land to be torn up for mining (after being conquered), polluted with industrial waste products, and covered with pavement, and the car feeds back into this system by insulating and disconnecting people behind its metal walls and blurring speeds, so they lose touch with their neighbors and with the world they're destroying. Also cars enable us to put more distance between the places we have to go, forcing us to have cars to get there, and thus to do thousands of hours of commanded labor to be permitted to own them.

Sure, everyone knows cars are bad. But what about all the good stuff in civilization, like our medical advances?

Most of industrial medicine exists to treat diseases and injuries that are caused by industrial civilization in the first place, like heart disease and

Not all of them think like this, but those who do have gone straight down the rabbit hole, a lot closer to psychedelic guru Terence McKenna than to the hard-science techies of the past. It also suggests a new angle of criticism: What would they say if a nerve center of the acceleration *did* take a direct hit? Say, if the World Trade Center was suddenly demolished, or the library of Alexandria was burned down, or the entire Mayan civilization ran out of topsoil and died? Presumably, they would point to their curve, still accelerating regardless. But this raises the question: Are they drawing their picture of the curve the way fools see Jesus on a tortilla? Are they just connecting the dots that confirm their hypothesis, and ignoring all the other dots? The complexity of the Roman Empire was lost, but look, the curve is accelerating anyway, with the spread of water wheels. America is turning into a police state, the global corporate economy is stalling, cheap energy is almost gone, but look — computers are getting faster! Quick, somebody make a definition of progress that makes computer chip advances seem extremely important. How about information exchange per unit time per unit volume?

Now, they don't need to establish that the acceleration is built into history, to say that it's happening now and going somewhere important. But here's the next objection: that faster computers will not influence the larger world in the way they're thinking. By standards necessary to fit their curve, how much better are computers now than they were ten years ago? 20 times? 500 times? And what were the results of these changes? Now we can browse porn on web sites that are cluttered with animated commercials. It will be possible for the Chinese government to track a billion citizens with RFID cards. And computers are now powerful enough to emulate *old* computers, so we can play old games that were still creative before new computers enabled game designers to use all their attention and the processing power of a thousand 1950's mainframes creating really cool fog.

The acceleration of computers does not manifest in the larger world as an acceleration. Occasionally it does, but more often it manifests as distraction, as anti-harmonious clutter, as tightening of control, as elaboration of soulless false worlds, and even as slowdown. Today's best PCs take longer to start up than the old Commodore 64. I was once on a flight that sat half an hour at the gate while they waited for a fax. I said, "It's a good thing they invented fax machines or we'd have to wait three days for them to mail it." Nobody

Is it? It's tempting to argue against it on technological terms, but this is precisely where they've focused their defense, with careful and sophisticated arguments that the process will not be stopped by physical limits to miniaturization or the speed of information transfer, or by the challenges of software. So I'll give them that one, which opens more interesting subjects:

What about the ongoing economic collapse, the coming climate catastrophes, the decline of oil production and the inevitable decline in food production? Won't the famines and resource wars and currency collapses and blackouts and crumbling infrastructure and failed states also stop the acceleration of information processing? They have two lines of defense: First, it won't happen. John Smart of Acceleration Watch^[http://accelerationwatch.com] writes, "I don't think modern society will ever allow major disruptive social schisms again, no matter the issue: the human technocultural system is now far too immune, interdependent, and intelligent for that." Second, it doesn't matter. They argue that the curve they're describing was not slowed by the fall of Rome or the Black Death, that innovation has continued to rise steadily, and that it's even helped by alternating trends of political centralization and decentralization.

Imagine this: the American Empire falls, grass grows on the freeways, but computers take relatively little energy, so the internet is still going strong. And all the technology specialists who survived the dieoff are now unemployed, with plenty of time to innovate, free from the top-heavy and rigid corporate structure. And the citadels of the elite still have the resources to make new hardware, the servers and parallel networks that compile the information and ideas coming in from people in ramshackle houses, eating cattail roots, wired to the network through brainwave readers and old laptops.

Can this happen? Many accelerationists — if they accept the coming crash at all — would say something like this *must* happen. They seem to think (as I do) that matter is rooted in mind, and in addition they think that history falls in line however it has to, to manifest the guiding principle of the acceleration. So the key human players will not be killed in the plague, and the nerve centers will not be nuked, and computers will not all be fried by a solar flare, and the internet will not die (until there's something better to replace it) because that would violate the deeper law that the acceleration must go on.

cancer and car crashes, which are rare or nonexistent in nature. And mostly it fails to treat them, and only succeeds in prolonging sickness to increase the power of the medical system and allow it to more completely colonize our lives.

Didn't primitive people live only 30 years, and have lots of health problems?

Non-civilized people observed in historical times tend to be healthier than civilized people, and quite long-lived. As for prehistoric people, we can only look at their skeletons. Here's what Jared Diamond wrote in The Worst Mistake in the History of the Human Race[17]:

> "At Dickson Mounds, located near the confluence of the Spoon and Illinois rivers, archaeologists have excavated some 800 skeletons that paint a picture of the health changes that occurred when a hunter-gatherer culture gave way to intensive maize farming around AD 1150. . . Compared to the hunter-gatherers who preceded them, the farmers had a nearly 50 percent increase in [tooth] enamel defects indicative of malnutrition, a fourfold increase in iron-deficiency anemia (evidenced by a bone condition called porotic hyperostosis), a threefold rise in bone lesions reflecting infectious disease in general, and an increase in degenerative conditions of the spine, probably reflecting a lot of hard physical labor."

Still, on the whole, don't we live better than primitive people? Didn't they constantly struggle for existence and fight each other a lot?

It's true that people in emotionally healthy subcultures in elite nations have it better in many ways than people in the nastiest tribes. But some observed nature-based societies look like utopia compared to civilization — the political structure is egalitarian and non-coercive, fighting is rarely deadly, the people are strong and happy, and they spend only a few hours

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[17] http://www.ditext.com/diamond/mistake.html

a day in the meaningful activities of survival, and the rest of their time playing and slacking off.

What about the Aztecs or the Mayans or the Incas, who had strict hierarchy and human sacrifice and military conquest to support increasing populations?

I classify them as civilizations because they had repressive centralized systems linked to "growth" economies. It's true that there's not a clear division between civilized and primitive. I suspect that some North American tribes were well on their way to complex top-down government and depletion of the land. But the point is, humans are capable of the whole range, from killing nature to supporting it, from runaway increase to balance, from repression to peaceful anarchy. Even if only *one* tribe lived at the nice end of all those scales, it would be evidence that something like that is possible for all of us. In fact many did, and could again.

What about the really nasty tribes that are clearly primitive?

The orthodox primitivist position is that we have to live with it, that despite the flaws, forager-hunter tribes are the best humans can do. Personally I think we can do better. But even if we can't, if you consider everyone from best-off to worst-off, primitive life is still preferable to industrial civilization.

I read that murder rates are higher among primitive people.

Sure, if you only count it as murder when one person hits another person with an axe! Highly complex societies have the luxury of more powerful and subtle murders. I consider all cancer deaths to be homicides — or suicides if the victims are also willing participants in the crimes. Cancer was rare in pre-industrial times and even rarer in pre-civilized times. You get it from a combination of emotional distress and exposure to toxic environmental factors, and the people who make and enable the decisions to create those factors are the murderers. Heart disease is suicide-homicide by the corporations that profit from trans fats and other heart-disease-causing foods, and their stockholders. Lung cancer is suicide-homicide by tobacco companies

has been steadily declining. Or they say that "technology" has given every American the power of hundreds of slaves without any actual people being enslaved — never mind the actual people who are enslaved, in greater numbers than ever even under a strict definition of slavery, and the subtle slaves who must do commanded labor or starve. . . and that even the alleged beneficiaries of this power have been enslaved by it, replacing their autonomous human abilities to build and move and eat and play and dream, with dependence on tools that require their submission to systems of domination.

Or they point out that we live longer (at least in the wealthy nations, while the medical system lasts). Industrial civilization is often justified in terms of the quantity of years that people stick around this place, with no thought about whether that's good or even whether we like it. One of the most popular techno-utopian visions is human immortality, but think it through: Either it would have to be reserved for the elite, or there would have to be a near-total ban on having kids, or possibly a culture of rampant suicide. Worse, without people cycling in and out, we would get total stagnation of science and culture, as the immortal elite, set in their ways, prevented any change they didn't like. Thomas Kuhn observed that scientific paradigm shifts happen only when the protectors of the old paradigm die out. If they had invented immortality 500 years ago, our textbooks would still have the Earth at the center.

Justifying "progress" in subjective qualitative terms is a losing game — the deeper you look under the shiny surface, the uglier it gets. So they talk almost completely in terms of numbers: smaller chips, faster computers, more information, higher complexity, economic growth. Ultimately this is a religious difference, a disagreement about fundamental values. But I can preach my religion with total transparency: the numbers have to justify themselves in terms what they do for your own experience of your quality of life, and your empathy with the quality of life of others, both human and nonhuman. They can't stand up and preach the opposite: that our lives have to justify themselves in terms of what we do for the numbers — that is the value system of industrial civilization, but if it's made explicit it's clearly insane.

Still, even if they admit to having an insane religion, they can say, "Ha, we're winning! The direction of change that we support is going stronger than ever, and it's going to continue."

since there's no biological basis to imagine that new life forms will destroy old ones, how did they come to imagine that?

Machines will not "carry evolution beyond humans", because humans never carried evolution in the first place. From the perspective of the rest of life, we have served evolution only by creating difficult conditions to force other species to adapt or go extinct. Even stone age humans drove some species to extinction. With the invention of grain agriculture, this behavior accelerated, and it accelerated again with the industrial age. Now we seem to be causing the greatest mass extinction since the asteroid impact that exterminated the dinosaurs.

Even in strictly human terms, it's not clear that our recent direction of change has been good. Anthropologists such as Stanley Diamond[22] and Marshall Sahlins[23] have argued that "primitive" humans enjoy greater health, happiness, political power, and ease of existence than than all but the luckiest civilized humans. Of course, some tribes are repressive and badly adapted, and there is no way to measure the subjective quality of life in prehistory. But even in historic times, some things have been getting worse. In ancient Greece, even slaves had a deep social role as part of a household, unlike even higher class modern workers, who are valued as things, interchangeable parts in engines of profit.

Medieval serfs worked fewer hours than modern people, at a slower pace, and passed less of their money up the hierarchy. We declare our lives better than theirs in terms of our own cultural values. If medieval people could visit us, I think they would be impressed by our advances in alcohol, pornography, and sweet foods, and appalled at our biophobia, our fences, the lifelessness of our physical spaces, the meaninglessness and stress of our existence, our lack of practical skills, and the extent to which we let our lords regulate our every activity.

Defenders of our momentary way of life often cite the medical system, but the cost of that system has been increasing (exponentially?) while base human health — the ability to live and thrive in the absence of a medical system —

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22 http://www.primitivism.com/uses-primitive.htm
23 http://www.primitivism.com/original-affluent.htm

that standardize the nicotine dose and add even more addictive substances to increase their profits. Every car crash death is a homicide by the various interests that set us up to have no choice but to drive around in cars all day.

If there are going to be murders, I'd rather have them out in the open and honest. If you get killed in a tribal war, you're probably suffering less at your moment of death than industrialized people suffer every day, because you can see the story that you're part of.

Aren't you romanticizing primitive people? They're not perfect, you know.

There's no such thing as "perfection." That's a fantasy of increase-based society that makes us think the world in front of us is never good enough, so that we have to keep reaching for more wealth and control. The nonexistent techno-utopia is "perfect." I'm just observing what's been documented by civilization's own anthropologists, and noticing that, while imperfect, it's preferable to "civilized" life.

But you seem happy to me. You should be thankful you live in America.

That's like telling a serial killer he should be thankful he gets to drink the blood of his victims, instead of telling him to quit killing. People in elite nations are rewarded with cheap pleasures in exchange for consenting to a system that kills and robs people in poorer nations and nonhumans everywhere. And they're still not satisfied. They chase status and money and distract themselves with hedonism and toys to try to cover up the emptiness of their existence. The only reason my existence feels meaningful is I've begun to see through the whole sham and I'm exploring ways to do something about it. I'll feel thankful I live in America when the American Empire has broken down into thousands of autonomous nature-based communities and we can ride horses on the ruined freeways.

So you want us all to go back to the stone age?

The word "back" is a trick. It implies a magical absolute direction of change. Suppose you go to your job, and when you get ready to leave, your boss

says, "So you want to go *back* to your house? Don't you know you can never go back? You can only go forward, to working for me even more, ha ha ha!" Really, all motion is forward, and forward motion can go in any direction we choose, including to places we've been before.

So you want us all to go forward to the stone age?

The term "stone age" is another trick, if it's interpreted as a temporary stage in a progression that logically had to lead to the age we're in now. There's no biological reason to suppose this. Sharks have barely changed in the last 100 million years, and we consider them successful for finding a place they fit and staying there. Humans fit with nature for one to two million years, and then less than ten thousand years ago some of us tried something different that's obviously not working. Ten thousand years out of a million is like 36 seconds out of an hour.

OK, OK. So you want us to go forward to hunting and gathering, using fire and stone tools and living in grass huts, and just stay there?

That would be a nice way to live, but I don't think it's going to happen, at least not soon. I'm not asking any person raised in civilization to switch to a forager-hunter lifestyle, and I'm not going to do it myself. It's too hard to learn as an adult, and right now nature is too killed back for it to be easy for anyone. If civilization crashes, and humans survive, then in a few generations it might be practical for people to start living that way. But there will be plenty of other options — at least until the scrap metal is gone. In the near future, we're going to have to live in a way that both feeds us in a dead world, and rebuilds the life of that world. I think the permaculture movement is on the right track.

So you're against technology — you're a technophobe.

I love technology! A fungo*phobe* is someone who fears all mushrooms, who assumes they're all deadly poisonous and isn't interested in learning about them. A fungo*phile* is someone who is intensely interested in mushrooms,

gravity so strong that not even light can escape. The line of no return is called the event horizon, and the word "singularity", in techno-utopianism, is meant to imply that "progress" will take us to a place we can neither predict, nor understand, nor return from.

The mechanism of this change is the "acceleration", which is based on "Moore's Law": In 1965, Gordon Moore wrote a famous article pointing out that the number of components per computer chip was increasing exponentially. Since then, many other numbers measuring computer power have been found to be increasing exponentially, or even faster than exponentially. But Moore himself never called this a law. It's a behavior of the present system, and it's anyone's guess how long it will continue.

Some techies believe that the acceleration is somehow built into history, or even metaphysics. They trace it back into the Paleolithic, or farther, and trace it speculatively forward to computers that are more complex than the human brain, that are more aware and smarter and faster than us, that keep improving until they replace humans or even biological life itself. (This is often called "transhumanism," a word I'm avoiding because there are forms of transhumanism that are not allied to machines.) They imagine we might finally have a computer that is "bigger" on the inside than the outside, that can perfectly model the entire universe.

A question they never ask is: why? They seem to believe it's self-justifying, that density/speed of information processing is valuable *as* density/speed of information processing. They might argue that just as the biosphere is better than the universe by being more densely complex, so a computer chip is better than the biosphere.

One difference is that biosphere did not gain its complexity by destroying the universe, as their system has gained complexity by destroying the biosphere. They always claim to represent "evolution". or a "new evolutionary level". But evolution doesn't have levels. Evolution is a biological process in which species adapt, and the totality of life grows more diverse and complex. Occasionally the whole thing is cut down by catastrophe and rebuilds itself. Evolution is not about one life form pushing out another, or we wouldn't still have algae and bacteria and 350,000 known species of beetles. And one has to wonder:

From outside civilization, these are all the vaporous conceits of a pathological culture on the verge of collapse. Of course there are other philosophies that make our accustomed reality seem trivial — there's Cartesian nihilism, that we are just a bunch of dead bouncing particles and waves, and there's the astronomy cliche that we're just parasites on a speck of dust in the vastness of the cosmos, and there's the religious doctrine that our life on Earth is nothing compared to an eternity in heaven or hell. But none of these provides a *real* alternative — by which I mean an alternative that we can explore with our senses. Thus they all lead to greater disconnection, and often despair.

The critique of civilization (which could more precisely be called the *nature-based* critique of civilization) does provide a real alternative. That's why it's so dangerous. The meaning of life doesn't require theologians or philosophers. *It doesn't even require language.* You can find it under a rock, in a weedy vacant lot, off the shoulder of the freeway: the larger story in which your life fits, not to go somewhere, but to be home.

The Age of Batshit Crazy Machines[21]

"Progress" is a religion based on the reality of change. Supposed progress differs from observed change in two ways: First, it is declared to be good in an objective, absolute sense. It's one thing to say "I prefer this change", and another thing to postulate an infallible all-powerful entity who agrees with your preference. Second, progress is irreversible, and more: the worlds it leaves behind may not be revisited by changing in the other direction, or even by circling around. It's as if we're getting more and more orange, and now green and red, and even dull orange, are forever inaccessible. This is the motion of imprisonment. Western culture has only two other myths of places that, once you go in, you can never leave: hell, and a black hole.

"The Singularity" is the biggest idea in techno-utopianism. The word is derived from black hole science — it's the point at the core where matter has contracted to zero volume and infinite density, beyond the laws of time and space, with

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21 Originally published July 4, 2005 on http://ranprieur.com/essays/machines.html

who reads about them, samples them, and learns which ones are poisonous, which ones taste good, which ones are medicinal and for what, which ones are allied to which trees or plants or animals. This is precisely my attitude toward technology. I am a technophile!

Now, what would you call someone who runs through the woods indiscriminately eating every mushroom, because they believe "mushrooms are neutral," so there are no bad ones and it's OK to use any of them as long as it's for good uses like eating and not bad uses like conking someone over the head? You would call this person dangerously stupid. But this is almost the modern attitude toward "technology." Actually it's even worse. Because of the core values of civilization, that conquest and control and forceful transformation are good, because civilization "grows" by dominating and exploiting and killing, and by numbing its members to the perspectives of their victims, it has been choosing and developing the most poisonous technologies, and ignoring or excluding tools allied to awareness, aliveness, and equal participation in power. It's as if we're in a world where the very definition of "mushroom" has been twisted to include little other than death caps and destroying angels and deadly galerinas, and we wonder why health care is so expensive.

What are some technologies you like?

One of my favorites is the beaver dam, which could be built by humans too, but it's easier to just bring in some beaver "contractors" and let them go to work. It creates a nice pond, raises ground water, buffers runoff and prevents droughts and floods downstream, and after many years of collecting organic material that would otherwise wash away, it becomes a wetland or meadow that increases the diversity and abundance of life. And if you say "that's not a technology," you confirm my point that the definition of "technology" has been twisted to include only poisonous ones, dead machines that enable the concentration of power in an alienated detached perspective.

Another great technology is cob building, a mixture of sand, clay, and dry grass that absorbs and radiates heat and can last hundreds of years. Also, recent innovations in wood burning, like Ianto Evans's rocket stove, are almost perfectly clean and efficient while still being allied to a bottom-up

social order. Permaculturists are rediscovering techniques mastered by rain forest people, arranging fruit and nut trees, berry bushes, and perennial or self-seeding ground covers so that they work together harmoniously and produce abundant food with little maintenance while actually increasing soil fertility.

A good mechanical technology is the bicycle, which is cheap and simple enough to be compatible with autonomy, and moves more efficiently than any land animal, though it remains to be seen whether bicycles can be manufactured by a sustainable and non-coercive society. I don't see any problem with telescopes, stone buildings, sailing ships, unpaved roads, sophisticated ceramics, or hand tools fashioned from scavenged metal.

Of course, almost all "primitive" technologies are great, not for romantic reasons but for hard practical reasons: They keep us close to the Earth where we remain aware of the needs and perspectives of other life. They do not require the importation of energy or resources from distant places where we're not intimate with the life and would tolerate its destruction. And they are allied to non-coercive human societies: If the tools on which people depend are all within reach of everyone, if anyone can build a shelter, make a fire, weave a basket, dig up tubers, kill a deer, tan a hide and make clothing, then a dominating power has no leverage to make us obey.

But don't people in undeveloped countries want more development?

Some of them do. It doesn't mean they're right. If I take away your food and give you a bit of heroin, you might want more heroin. People who have been separated from a nature-based way of living, and are shown no way out of their meaningless poverty except meaningless affluence, images of first-worlders enjoying their shiny toys, will tend to believe those toys will make them happy. They're wrong. This is proven by the fact that suicide rates are higher in "developed" countries.

And many of them don't want our toys — they want equal participation in power, and land reform, and the overthrow of the colonial government that extracts wealth from their nation to send it to the imperial centers. They understand that "development" means loans on terrible terms that enrich

The key question is: Is wild nature part of the prison? Anyone who has spent ten minutes watching swallows at sunset will not accept a belief system that declares a need for swallows to awaken. As Edward Abbey said:

> "In metaphysics, the notion that earth and all that's on it is a mental construct is the product of people who spend their lives inside rooms. It is an indoor philosophy."

In fact, most interpretations of Gnosticism are far more sophisticated than that. They're also more sophisticated than the simple anti-civ position, that nature is the more-real outside world and civilization (both its mental and physical aspects) is the prison. They might say that the prison includes a certain view of nature, and to get outside it we have to see beyond that, to a spiritual nature that lies deeper, as the ocean underlies its surface. (Here's a discussion of gnosticism and nature[20] on fantastic planet.)

The critique of civilization can enrich gnosticism by contributing powerful stories with hard details about a particular prison, how it was constructed, and how to get out of it. And gnosticism can give something back: a metaphysical explanation for what civilization means and where it came from, a deep story of the origin of this hell-world that speaks of intelligence and intention and not just blind chance. I've read (and written) plenty of speculations about how civilization got started, and the hypothesis that humans have been possessed by life-hating occult entities is not only the most meaningful, but one of the more plausible.

The Meaning of Life.

When we ask about "the meaning of life," we are asking for the larger story in which our life fits. Inside civilization, the larger story is "progress." Progress and its corollaries, "growth" and "wealth" and "education" and "upward" social mobility, tell us what makes a meaningful and successful life: a college degree, a professional certification, a clean house in the suburbs, a stock portfolio for retirement, and some personal contribution to humans going somewhere new.

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[20] http://www.snant.com/fp/archives/gnosticism-and-nature/

advanced civilization, a many-headed entity that destroys the world and forces us into submission.

Eastern Religion

There are a lot of Eastern religions and philosophies, and this argument does not apply to all of them. But the most popular ones seem to contain two key myths of civilization. One is humanism, which appears as the idea that humans are on a "higher" spiritual "level" than all other animals. And the other, underlying this, is the idea of spiritual "progress," that different states of being can be put in order from worse to better, and that we are supposed to travel in the correct direction toward some ideal state at the top. To defend these beliefs, you have to hold that progress and human superiority are universal truths, even though they have only ever appeared in a short-lived and deviant culture which is using them to drive the greatest mass-extinction in 60 million years.

Now, an Eastern-style belief system could avoid this criticism if it were willing to strip off value, to declare that humans and other beings are merely in different places, none better or worse, and if I want to go hang out as a three-toed sloth for a billion lifetimes, that is exactly as commendable as seeking "enlightenment." I'm sure the actual religions have more subtle ways to answer the criticism, but to my knowledge, none of them are willing to accept the possibility that the last several thousand years of human changes have been a spiritual mistake.

Gnosticism

Gnosticism is one of the few civilized belief systems that is not overturned by the critique of civilization, but just gets its hair blown a little, and then can hang around and have a dialogue. I'm dealing here with the simplified popular "gnosticism" found in movies like *The Matrix* and *The Truman Show*: that we are in an artificial reality, a prison for the mind and body, that we are kept here by a sinister architect and agents who seem to be people like us, that we can escape from the prison or even destroy it, and that someone on the outside is trying to help us.

the local elites and force people out of self-sufficient local economies into corporate enslavement.

Truly "undeveloped" people, who have not been separated from a nature-based way of living, are never envious of civilization. They think it's silly and choose it only under extreme pressure. In fact, without coercion, people go the other way. Benjamin Franklin[18] wrote:

> "When an Indian child has been brought up among us, taught our language and habituated to our customs, yet if he goes to see his relations and makes one Indian Ramble with them, there is no perswading him ever to return. And . . . when white persons of either sex have been taken prisoners young by the Indians, and lived awhile among them, tho' ransomed by their Friends, and treated with all imaginable tenderness to prevail with them to stay among the English, yet within a Short time they become disgusted with our manner of Life, and the care and pains that are necessary to support it, and take the first good Opportunity of escaping again into the Woods, from whence there is no reclaiming them."

But civilized also means polite, considerate, peaceful, broad-minded, cultured, learned, and so on. Are you against all that?

That use of the word "civilized" is a trick. To destroy life, to conquer, to imprison, to torture, are typical behaviors of civilization and less common in other societies. The Arawaks brought gifts to Columbus and he hacked up their children to feed to dogs. Which culture was "civilized"? The behavior that we call "civilized" is common only at the centers of civilization, among the sheltered elite. And even our greatest thinkers can barely match the typical forager-hunter, who has knowledge and understanding of thousands of plant and animal species, where they grow, how they interrelate, what they're good for. The native view of the spirit world behind the physical

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18 http://web.archive.org/web/20041014193319/http://mbhs.bergtraum.k12.ny.us/cybereng/FF/FFchp5.html

world, whether or not you think it's true, is more deep and complex than the cold doctrines and abstractions of western religion.

Every primitive human knows how to improvise a shelter and find wild edibles. Not only do civilized people lack primitive skills, we even lack civilized skills — most of us can't even program a VCR or change the oil in a car. We are the most pathetic and powerless humans who have ever lived. This is good news! As wonderful as you think your apartment and your TV shows are, that world is a padded cell compared to the rest of the universe.

If primitive people are so much better than civilized people, why do they always lose?

That's like saying if I can beat you up I must be better than you. A nation that puts its attention into warfare and conquest will always defeat a nation that puts its energy into relaxation and play. People who have lived densely for millennia will have developed epidemic diseases, and partial immunity to them, while people who have lived in isolated tribes will have no immunity and will be killed off at contact.

Sure, but if they're so susceptible to invasion, and epidemics, and conversion by missionaries, and alcoholism, and TV addiction, then doesn't it follow that if we all lived like that again, we would just slide into civilization the first time someone invented the wrong technology and started conquering people, just like last time?

That won't happen right away, because the fuels that fed civilization — topsoil, forests, easily extracted metal and oil — are mostly gone. But soil and forests will come back, so in the long term, that's a strong argument against simple primitivism. Civilization is an emotional plague, and those who have been exposed to it are more resistant to it. Either we can evolve permanent resistance, in which case we will be different from any previous

The critique of civilization, when you think it through, leads us directly into the so-called "paranormal," into the expansion of our curious attention through new sciences that can accept and navigate diverse realities.

Biblical Literalism

The belief that the Bible (or any other religious document) is simply literally true, is not conservatism but extreme modernism. The deeper people shrink into the tightly controlled mind space of civilization, the less they are able to deal with complexity, ambiguity, mutability, or aliveness. They don't know how to admit they're wrong, change their minds, or do any real spiritual wrestling — they just want someone to tell them how it is, period, forever. So they choose to take whatever collection of translations of old writings was put in front of them by some authority, and accept it as true in the simplest way. Whatever religion they think they are, they are Cartesians, believing in the reducibility of all experience to machine-like mental models, and they are worshippers of Empire, insisting on a spiritual system that forces universal uniformity of perspective and enables central control.

Western Religion

The stories of Christianity (which overlap the stories of Judaism and Islam) make a lot more sense when they're interpreted in the context of the critique of civilization. (For more on this subject, check out Daniel Quinn's book *Ishmael*.) The Garden of Eden represents the original human condition, a life of ease and plenty, staying in our place and taking what God/Nature gives us. The Fall is our choice to reject this way of living, to take food by force by domesticating plants and animals and storing great surpluses, so that we're no longer dependent on God/Nature, but have made ourselves into gods. When Jesus told people to abandon material wealth, and imitate the birds and the flowers, he was telling us to abandon civilization and return to living as part of nature. Even the Beast of Revelations resembles

lounging in grass huts eating mangoes, or will blow by us in the future when we're doing so again.

The Economy

What we call the "economy" is only one particular economy, characterized by: 1) command by "corporations," artificial superhumans defined as having no compassion, only the drive to increase their own ability to dominate. 2) "growth," or the escalating transformation of the life of the Earth into dead artifacts and the tokens of ability-to-dominate, or "wealth." 3) "employment," a radically disempowering social arrangement in which humans do commanded hyper-specialized labor all day in exchange for tokens which they trade for necessities and entertainment, neither of which they know how to provide for themselves, but which are provided by other commanded laborers who they don't even know.

It's hard to imagine a more satanic system, and in its absence we would build different economies, almost any of which would be better. Also, when you understand what the tokens of wealth are based on, the whole system looks like a bunch of kids making play money with which they buy and sell back, at higher and higher prices, a bar of chocolate that they're almost done eating, and that was stolen in the first place. Instead of trying to save that system, or even trying to destroy it, we should just get the hell out.

Science

What we call "science" is only one particular science, a style of filtering experience that has been designed by and for a culture of uniformity and central control. It accepts only experiences that can be translated into numbers, that are available to everyone, and that can be reproduced on command. This is what scientists mean when they demand "proof." But this is only a tiny thread of all possible experiences, most of which are unique, not quantifiable, not reproducible, and not the same for all observers. Basically, the science of Empire deals only with fully domesticated data and not wild data, because a science that accepted wild data would feed a culture that would quickly diversify into a chaos that would make central control impossible.

natural humans, or we can't, and we're doomed to keep cycling through ages of health and destructive sickness until we go extinct.

Isn't civilization part of evolution?

Biological evolution moves toward greater complexity, diversity, and abundance of life. What determines "fitness" to survive is how well a creature fits with the whole, how well it maintains the ecosystem on which its survival depends. Civilization moves in the opposite direction, toward uniformity and deadness, replacing all human cultures with one, replacing all habitats with monoculture farms and pavement. The civilized myth of "survival of the fittest" is about exterminating competitors and depleting the ecosystem to generate large numbers of identical things. The "progress" of civilization is anti-evolution. The only thing in the evolutionary process that it resembles is a catastrophe, something that wipes out all but the most adaptable species and forces evolution to start over.

But isn't human civilization at least a continuation of human evolution, in which we came down from the trees, invented fire and stone tools, developed larger brains, more sophisticated tools, and so on to where we are now?

No. This series of human changes switched, at some point, from co-evolution with other life to anti-evolution against it. The most common story goes like this: One or two million years ago we became "human" and made ourselves a niche, where we could have stayed forever, or continued our evolution on other paths that kept us in balance with the whole. But with the invention of grain agriculture, some humans made a terrible wrong turn and dragged the rest of the world with them.

In other stories we made the wrong turn farther back, possibly with symbolic language, or division of labor, or even with the taming of fire; and at that point, something like this was bound to happen sooner or later. In any

case, the next question is whether we can evolve out of this hellhole, into a species that can keep itself in balance.

Are humans inherently bad?

I'd say we're inherently dangerous. Because so much of our behavior is determined by culture, we're much more malleable than any other animal — we have the power to create very good behavior patterns or very bad ones.

Couldn't we build a good civilization, one that had a lot of modern technologies but was peaceful and environmentally sustainable?

Maybe. But our familiar "technologies" were developed in the context of conquest and central control and runaway exploitation and the numbness to make it all tolerable. We have the ones we have because they fed back into these habits, and they would continue to do so. Even if we had cars powered by fusion plants, they would still daze us with their speed and enable us to live far apart, when we need to slow to a walking pace to know nature, and live close together to know our neighbors. We need tools allied to sharing, not isolation, and energy sources that do not require central administration, and energy in small enough quantities that we have to get our hands dirty and be intimate with what we're doing.

Tom Brown once asked Stalking Wolf why the cold didn't bother him. Stalking Wolf answered, "Because it's real." The same things that make primitive life uncomfortable make it more alive. In a society that protects us from that aliveness, and that also denies us the thrill of escalating "progress," how will we enjoy life enough to keep that society going?

Civilization keeps billions of people alive. If you're against it, doesn't that mean you want all those people to die?

It's civilization that wants all those people to die, by setting them up so their lives depend on practices that must end in famine and ecological disaster. I'm just the messenger. I'm not making anyone die by believing that civilization was a mistake, just as you can't save anyone by believing

that could possibly happen to humans and the Earth would be unlimited, free, clean energy. We would use it the way we have always used it, but more: to cut down filthy dangerous trees and replace them with clean safe artificial trees, to flatten useless mountains and put up engineered climbing rocks and ski slopes, to tame the weather into blue skies with puffy clouds that never rain, and don't need to rain because we have rivers of Dasani™ circulated through pumps. We would turn the Earth into 200 million square miles of Disneyland, with the few remaining wild animals in NatureDomes where every flea would be computer-tagged. And when this system finally crashed, through sheer incompatibility with the cosmos, nothing would survive bigger than bacteria.

Intelligent Life in Space

When civilized people say "intelligent life," they mean civilized life, creatures on other planets that kill or control other creatures on those planets to produce "resources" and machines of domination, which eventually get so "advanced" that they can fly through space and monopolize and exploit the life of more and more planets... But then our scientists get puzzled: Why, with a hundred billion stars in our galaxy, many of which must have planets suitable for life, haven't we found any evidence of extraterrestrial civilizations, beaming their modulated electromagnetic communications through the galaxy, warping around in metal ships like we see in our own culture's mythology of the future, landing on our planet and trading their more advanced distracting/dominating gadgets for our submission to the Interstellar Monetary Fund which stealthily enslaves the Earth's people and accelerates its transformation into a lifeless desert while temporarily enriching human elites?

What we're really looking for in space is other *stupid* life, other life that has gone mad the same way we have, and we haven't found it because our madness is a violently unsustainable deviation from reality, and if creatures on other planets have done it, they burned out and crashed in a galactic microsecond the same way we're doing, and their sitcoms and commercials and nationalist talk radio blew by us for only 50 years when we were

a new victim, or the suburbanite's desire for a more powerful lawn mower, or the eco-humanist's desire for clean fusion power.

Techno-Utopia

Jerry Mander, in his book *In the Absence of the Sacred*, offers a surprising metaphor for the technological "progress" of civilization. All known beings, other than civilized humans, adapt and co-evolve with an environment made up of other beings with whom they interact on equal terms. Civilized humans alone replace this living, dynamic, unpredictable environment with a controlled, self-constructed environment modeled on visions in our heads. Everywhere we replace what we have found with what we have made. Look around right now — how many things can you see that were not made by humans? It follows that our evolution is no longer with others but only with ourselves — we are *inbreeding!*

From the perspective of all other life, human civilization is a cancer, but from the perspective of humans, civilization is a blow-up doll, a dead synthetic membrane that we play with for shallow pleasure, in a mockery of real procreation, because we are too frightened and incompetent to deal with the complexity and aliveness of reality. Instead of walking on the forest floor and scanning it for the stems of edible roots, we walk on chemically-sterilized linoleum and scan it for dirty spots to clean. Instead of listening to the birds to know what other animals are around, we listen to mass-duplicated recorded music with lyrics typically about infantile fixations on other humans. Instead of watching the sky to know the coming weather, we watch mass-duplicated recorded TV shows that offer an idealized view of the tedious and meaningless dramas of our enclosed little world.

What keeps all this going is energy — specifically, energy in excess of what we would have through living in balance with other life, eating and using our muscles. Energy is the pump for the blow-up doll, or it's the physical drug that feeds the mental drugs of detachment and control, which we crave in greater and greater quantities, leading us compulsively toward genocide and ecocide.

We need less of this kind of "technology," not more. We need to get off our drug and come down before we kill everything that moves. The worst thing

that it can keep going. I'm actually trying to save lives, by breaking people out of a style of thinking that is tied to a style of living that is not sustainable, so they can learn ways of living that will get them through the crash.

You're against civilization, but what are you for? You'll never get anywhere without a positive vision of the future.

What makes you think I want to get anywhere? Only people under the spell of civilization need an exciting vision of a nonexistent future to motivate them. Cultures that live in balance feel no need for a "vision of the future" because they have a present that is acceptable. Instead, they focus on their ancestors. They would say, "You'll make terrible mistakes without being grounded in the ways of your ancestors," and they'd be right.

Our visions of the future have all turned out to be wrong. From techno-utopia to Hitler's Thousand Year Reich to the Age of Aquarius to Bush's crusade to bring "freedom" to Asia, they're a mixture of wishful thinking and lies that serve to motivate people to march toward something that turns out to be quite different.

Visions of the future are lies, and a culture that needs to be lied to cannot stand. If people will choose a comforting fantasy over a call for responsibility, as Americans did when they chose Reagan over Carter, then those people are already doomed.

But I'm a creature of civilization. I've lost touch with all my indigenous ancestors, and I *do* have visions of the future, plenty of them, which if I am "successful" will inspire my followers to make total asses of themselves while the world goes a direction no one expected. I envision stone age, medieval, modern, and "magical" technologies all dancing together in a world of wilderness and ruins.

The Critique of Civilization Changes Everything[19]

Now everything's a little upside down.
As a matter of fact the wheels have stopped.

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What's good is bad, what's bad is good.
You'll find out when you reach the top,
You're on the bottom.

— Bob Dylan, "Idiot Wind"

Conservatism

Conservatives believe in a lost "golden age" that they want to return to. But if you actually look at the ages they name, and not their romantic myths of those ages, you see that they were just as bad as this age by the conservatives' own standards: In 1950, or 1800, or even ancient Greece, they had taxes, irreverent young people, and loads of extramarital sex. That's a liberal critique of conservatism, but the critique of civilization goes farther, and explains more:

Most of the "traditions" glorified by conservatives are neither old, wise, stable, nor tested by time. They are short-lived, new, and radical. The nuclear family was invented to break down the extended family, which itself is a recent bastardization of the tribe. For that matter, so is the "nation." The modern concept of "ownership" is more aggressive than ancient and prehistoric concepts, and it mostly serves to concentrate power in banks and corporations, amoral institutions with radical effects on society. "Business" is a secular command structure with a psychopathic agenda that tramples the families, farms, and towns that conservatives idealize. Even tilling the soil, even monotheism, are relatively new "traditions," allied to an odd social experiment that is failing badly.

The real golden age that conservatives are yearning for emotionally, but not permitted to grasp intellectually, is our multi-million year heritage of living as part of nature.

Progressive Humanism

I use "progressive" in the sense of believing in "progress," change that goes in a straight line and makes the world better and better with no theoretical limit. Because humans are the only creatures on Earth that make any pretense

maintain balance between tribes, either by settling territorial disputes or by raiding supplies to redistribute wealth. (For more on this, look for Stanley Diamond's book *In Search of the Primitive*)

In civilization, our biological memories of what it means to go to war, and what it means to "support the troops," are hijacked and twisted to make us feel good about wars where old women and babies are machine-gunned and cities are firebombed to enable an empire to turn the world into a desert and feed the control-lust of its elites.

Likewise, among dissidents, our natural urge to fight the system physically is channeled into bombings and assassinations, which feed the kind of deadly violence that strengthens the patterns of Empire, and then the pacifists use this mistake to condemn all "violence" and limit dissent to protest marches and other symbolic expressions that are feeble and pathetic if they're not backed up by action.

If we understand this, we are neither for nor against "violence" or "war." We feel good about a certain kind of fighting and we refuse to be tricked into supporting another kind.

Greed

Everyone says the Bush gang, and the elite in general, are motivated by greed. But then some people look closer and say, "Wait, why to they keep seeking money when they already have so much that more will not improve their lives?"

When you look at the accumulation of capital in its ecological and spiritual context, from the first farmer storing grain up to Halliburton, you see that money is just a dream, a symbolic place-holder for detachment and control, the drugs of civilization, which make you feel strong and happy but then you need more and more just to feel normal. Under the mask, the corporate executive's desire for profit is the same thing as the serial killer's desire for

from reality that exists in the terminal stages of civilization. The other movement is apocalyptic nihilism.

Apocalyptic Nihilism

Nihilism is the urge to destroy everything because life sucks so bad. In civilization the human condition is so inadequate that nihilism makes its way into religion in the form of apocalyptic prophecies, comforting assurances that this nightmare can't go on forever, that it's all going to blow up or some merciful god will sweep it away. And it makes its way into politics in the form of the lust for destructive war. In advanced civilization, when alienation and distress are overwhelming, the apocalyptic subplots come to the front as powerful movements that attempt murder-suicide on a national or even global scale.

The anti-civilization movement is like an apocalyptic religion that has awakened: unlike the others, it can explain and justify its emotional motivation for seeking the end of the world, it can precisely define the "world" that it wants to end, it can explain in verifiable terms why that world cannot and must not survive, and it can point to a world that it wants to preserve, a foundation for post-apocalypse living that is grounded in the documented reality of nature-based human cultures.

War / Violence

Why do young men always get excited about going off to war? They think it's going to be fun and thrillingly dangerous, and then it turns out to be intensely uncomfortable and boring, punctuated by horrific pointless killing and maiming, and they return cynical and traumatized for life, and then 20 years later, young men again get excited about going off to war. What's going on here?

Tribal warfare among nature-based people is very much like the warfare that young men idealize. It's consensual, civilians are rarely harmed, it's fun and meaningful, and deadly force is constrained by ritual, so that serious injury and death are just common enough to make it interesting. Also the economic function of this warfare is not to build an empire, but to

of changing this way, progressivism implies humanism, the attitude that humans are the subjects of this world and all other creatures are objects. Progressive humanism is the religion of civilization, so dominant that even conservatives are progressive humanists, just a little slow: in every age, they think changes were good until recently, but that these new changes are terrible.

Viewed from the larger context of all life on Earth, *all* the major changes have been terrible since the invention of grain agriculture, possibly farther back. The only way to change in a one-direction straight line is to lose your balance and fall.

Liberalism

I don't mean "liberal" in the classic sense, or in the sense of favoring change, but in the contemporary sense, where a liberal is someone who thinks people are basically good and we should all be able to live together in harmony. Why do they think this? For the same reason conservatives think there was a golden age in the past — *because it's true.* We all have a biological memory of living in harmony for more than a million years as humans and countless millions before that as other animals. But just as conservatives are blocked from this knowledge by romanticized images of the recent past, which stop them from looking farther back, liberals are blocked by *negative* images of the recent past: English factories of the 1800's, or the medieval church. (Never mind that the medieval church had a same-sex marriage ceremony, or that medieval peasants worked less than modern people, or that medieval serfdom was less financially oppressive than modern rent and mortgage.) Liberals look a short ways back, see stuff they don't like, and assume it just gets worse the farther you go.

Also, many aspects of tribal and natural life are offensive to civilized liberal values. Of tribes observed in historical times, some are peaceful, but others are violent, and there's evidence that the paleolithic was worse. Even in the nice tribes there is very little religious or ethnic diversity, and someone with a bumper sticker that says "Love animals, don't eat them" will find it hard to understand the morality of wild nature, where you love other species *and* eat them.

The critique of civilization explains why liberals always lose to fascists: because both exist in the context of civilization, which is fascist through and through. You can't make a round building on a square foundation. In a system built and maintained by the systematic murder and exploitation of other species, there is no stopping the systematic murder and exploitation of other humans. In a system ruled by a central authority that uses a monopoly on physical force to compel behavior, it is pathetic and half-assed to try to use this authority to force people to be nice and tolerant and take care of each other. If we're all going to get along, we have to do so from the bottom up.

Libertarianism

Libertarians understand the above argument, but they are willfully blind to systems of central control that are only slightly less obvious than government. Like conservatives, they take for granted very recent and radical techniques of domination, unaware of them the same way a fish is unaware of water.

The core libertarian value is not liberty but private "property" — just ask them if you have the liberty to set up a camp on their lawn. But the only known societies where nobody is forced to do anything they don't want to, are tribes where the concept of "property" extends only to small hand-made items. The "owning" of land is only a few hundred years old. Even in feudal times, when the lord could extort wealth from a certain territory, most of the actual land was considered wide open for anyone to cross, occupy, or use (though of course this "use" meant draining the life of the land to benefit the elite). Then with the enclosure movement, the more civilized elite declared every inch of land "owned" by someone, driving self-sufficient farmers from land their ancestors had occupied for centuries, and forcing them into the cities to labor in the dawning industrial age.

Libertarians should be smart enough to see that their idea of the political effect of land ownership is a fantasy. Both in practice and in theory, it does not lead to a utopia of small landholders freely farming and trading. Because land ownership channels wealth to those who already have wealth, it is politically destabilizing. Whoever owns land will use it to get more money,

more land, and more political power, leading as sure as water running downhill to a system where one giant multi-tentacled concentration of wealth/power commands almost all the land and all the people.

The only way to maintain liberty is to maintain equality of participation in power, which requires maintaining rough equality of wealth, and the only way to do that, without having a government using a monopoly on force to confiscate wealth, is to have economic equality built into the very foundation of the system. There are only two ways that's ever been done: to have a very close-knit community where social pressure alone is strong enough to prevent anyone from accumulating wealth, or to have a style of technology where your personal wealth is limited to useful items you can carry through the wilderness.

Anarchism

The anarchist ideal of a sustainable non-coercive society has been achieved by many nature-based peoples. Still, some anarchists embrace the critique of civilization (green anarchists or anarcho-primitivists) and some reject it (anarcho-syndicalists, anarcho-communists, and extropians). The difference is pretty much in their view of technological "progress." This is a tough nut to crack. It's easier to convert your mom to green anarchism than to convert a red anarchist. It requires a difficult reframing of our whole world-view, which I attempt below in the techno-utopia section.

The Bush Cult

The movement fronted by G.W. Bush is not conservative, though it uses a lot of gullible conservatives as foot soldiers. It is a coalition of at least two movements. One is extreme progressive humanism, an attempt to use overwhelming force to establish a global high-tech security state where corporate pseudo-capitalism can turn the whole planet into the Mall of America. This kind of insane vision should be expected in the detachment